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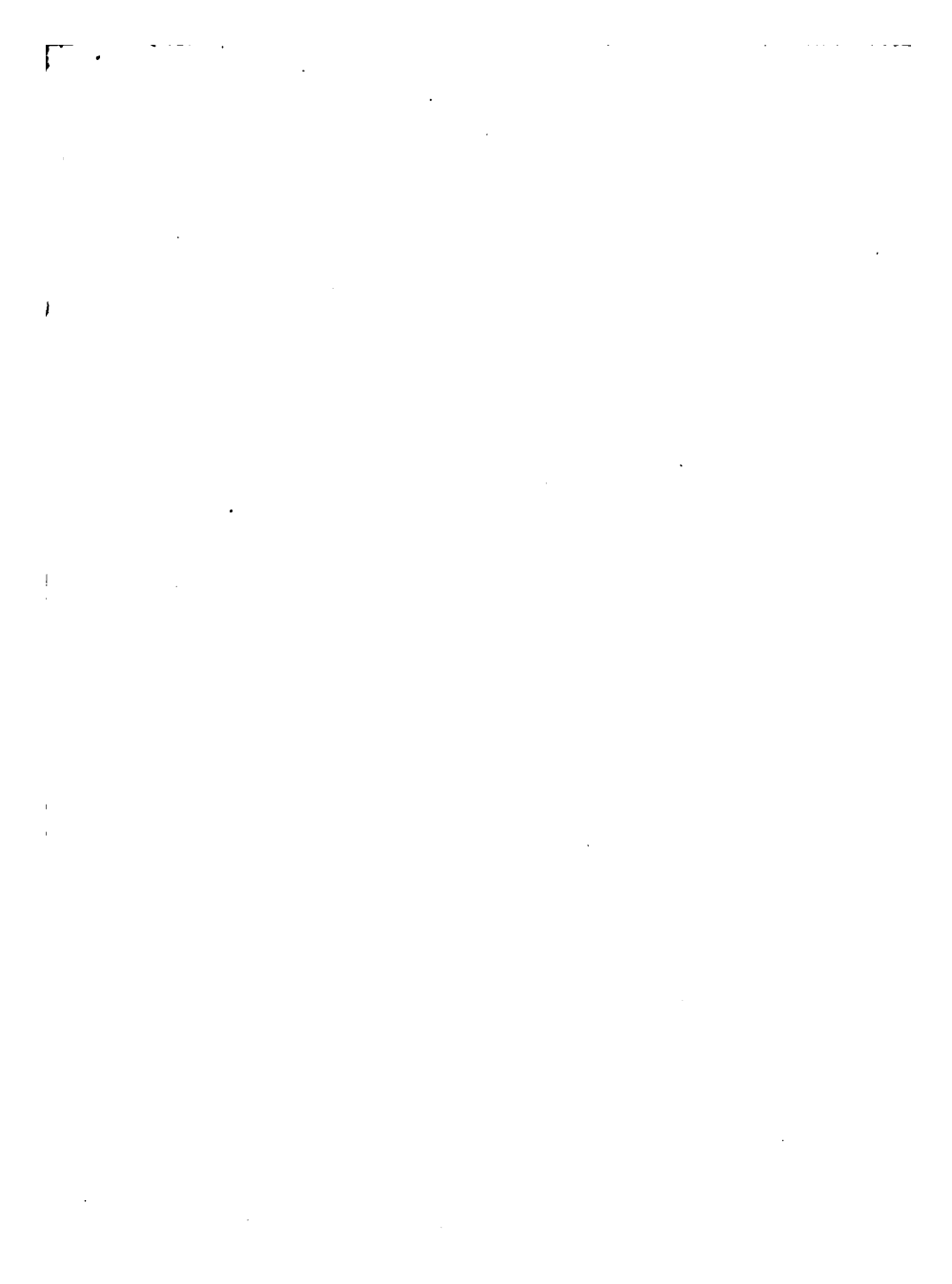
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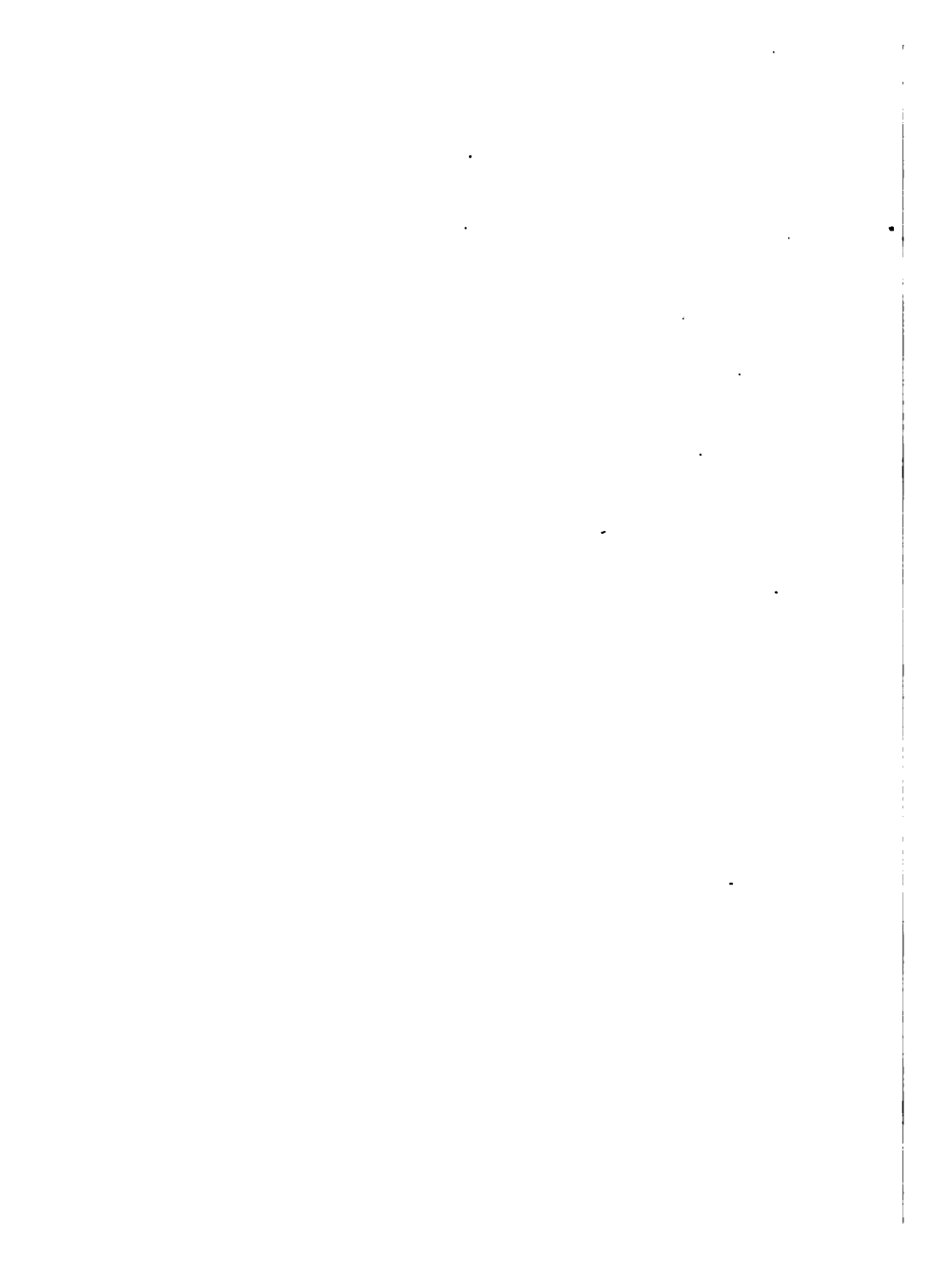
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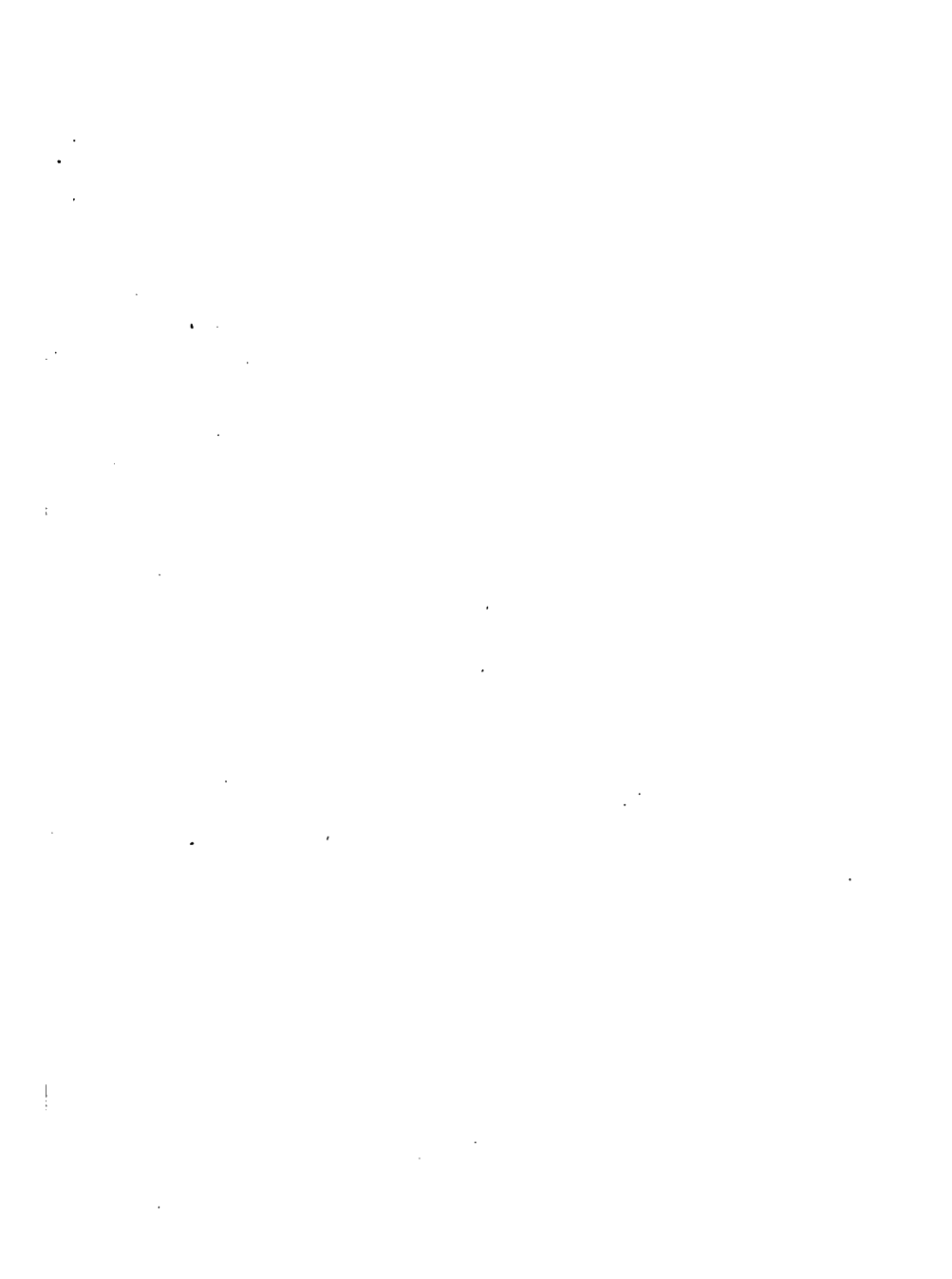


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The Children and the Little Rustics.

THE
DISCONTENTED CHILDREN,
AND
HOW THEY WERE CURED.

BY
MARY AND ELIZABETH KIRBY,
AUTHORS OF "THE LEICESTERSHIRE FLORA, STORIES FROM THE CLASSICS."

WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS BY HABLOT K. BROWNE.
(PHIZ.)

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TO
OUR DEAR LITTLE FRIENDS,
AGNES & ELLEN,
THIS STORY
IS
MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED.



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THE DISCONTENTED CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAIRY DISCONTENT IN THE SCHOOL-ROOM.

"MY head aches so dreadfully, I cannot learn this stupid lesson," cried Agatha Falkland, as she pushed her book impatiently away.

"And my exercise will never be done," said her brother Charles, a fine boy of twelve years of age, who sat looking out of the window, with his slate before him and his pencil in his hand. "It is much too difficult for me," added he, with a sigh; "and, besides, I heard the doctor tell papa it was a dangerous thing to work in hot weather."

"Dolly shall never learn any lessons," chimed in little Lucy, who was busy dressing her doll in a corner.

"You have no occasion to talk, child," returned her elder sister, snappishly, "what do you know about lessons? for my part, I wish there were no such things in the world."

"Shall we ask her majesty to abolish them altogether?" enquired Charles gravely, as he lounged out of the window, and pretended to fish with his riding whip.

"I wish you would," replied Agatha, in a complaining tone; "for only look, Miss Montague says I am to learn all this page without missing a word!"

"Why don't you complain to mamma?" said Charles.

"Why," interrupted Agatha hesitating, for she had a slight qualm of conscience that occasionally struggled into existence,— "why—because—the fact is, I was to have said it yesterday, but I was so poorly."

"And you are poorly again to-day, you know," said her brother, with a touch of sarcasm, "and if you have to learn your lessons nobody knows how ill it will make you."

"Is any thing the matter, sister Agatha?" asked little Lucy, who had now laid her doll in the cradle for its morning's nap, and came softly behind her sister's chair.

"Do get away, child, and don't tease me," said Agatha, vexed at her brother's ridicule; "how am I to learn this hateful geography if every body will talk?"

At this precise moment, the wicket gate at the further end of the lawn was opened, and a little boy and girl came timidly in, as if half frightened at their own presumption. They were pretty, light-haired, blue-eyed children, poorly, though neatly, dressed, and were pushing before them a pet lamb, that had its head and neck adorned with flowers and ribbons; and a great deal of whispering passed between them before they could summon courage to approach the window.

"O what a dear thing!" exclaimed Agatha; and in an instant lessons and head-ache were alike forgotten, and the three children ran with all speed down the flight of steps that led out upon the lawn.

The little rustics made one her curtsy and the other his bow; and then the boy, on whom the task of spokesman seemed to devolve, said in a cheerful pleasant voice, "We thought Miss you'd maybe like a pet lamb. It's very tame and will eat out of your hand."

"O how delightful!" cried Agatha; "and have you really brought this sweet little creature for me? How very kind of you!"

"How very kind!" repeated Lucy, throwing her arms round the lamb's neck, and beginning to play with its pretty wreath of flowers.

"There, that will do," said Agatha, pulling her rather impatiently away: "it is not your lamb remember; and now you may fetch me a piece of bread to feed it with."

"But what are you going to do with that great basket?" asked Charles of the little rustics.

"We are going into the wood to get cowslips for mother to make wine of," replied the boy.

"How very nice!" said Agatha, "and you have no lessons to learn, I suppose?" "No, not to-day, Miss, for we don't find time for schooling except on Sundays. But we must fill our basket with cowslips before dinner; so come along, Nancy," and he took his sister by the hand and drew her away.

"Only school on Sundays! how happy you must be?" said Agatha, as half unconsciously she walked by their side to the gate. "And what do you do all day?"

"I help father in the field," said the boy, "and milk the cow, and dig potatoes, and run of errands, and see after the pig, and sister there, helps mother in-doors, and holds the baby, and fetches water from the well, and gets our meals ready for us, and I can't tell you how many things we do besides."

"But all that is play-work," said Agatha, in rather a querulous tone; "you have no hard sums to prove, or long tiresome geography lessons to say by heart, or dates, or those stupid Saxon kings that one heartily wishes had never lived. I call that hard work, not running about in the green fields from morning till night as you do."

The children turned their bright eyes upon her with a broad stare of astonishment, not at all understanding what she meant; so John bowed very humbly, and Nancy curtsied very prettily, and each taking hold of the basket, they wished the petulant little lady good morning, and hurried away as fast as they could.

"Only school on Sundays," repeated Agatha, as she walked slowly back. "Charles," said she, calling to her brother, "those children have only school on Sundays."

"Why not, I wonder?" asked Charles, who was trying to

make the lamb eat out of his hand. "Because their parents can't afford it, I suppose," said Agatha. "Don't you wish Charles?"—and she stopped.

"Why not exactly," returned Charles, interpreting the question, and speaking rather doubtfully. "I should not quite like to be a gamekeeper's son, and have to dig potatoes. I don't know either," added he, "it might be capital fun when I grew a little more used to it."

"And gather cowslips in the wood," said Agatha, looking wistfully to the gate, "instead of being shut up such a beautiful morning in a close hot school-room."

"We might have some glorious games under the trees to be sure," continued Charles, "and sail our boats down the brook; do you remember it, Agatha?"

"O yes, we had tea beside it on the day of the picnic, and O Charles, do you know in the very heart of the wood is a large round piece of grass, as soft as velvet, and in the middle a real fairy ring. Don't you think we might take our playthings there; supposing, I mean, we were the gamekeeper's children, and had no lessons to learn?"

"Of course we might. I would take my bat and ball, and you, Agatha, your skipping-rope, and *Les Graces* sticks, and little Lucy, too, should have her doll's house."

"O never mind about Lucy; the poor child would be so tired with walking through the wood we should not know what to do with her."

"Unless we took James and the ponies," said Charles thoughtfully.

"You silly boy, if we were the gamekeeper's children we should have neither James nor the ponies."

"True, I forgot, nor little Lucy, nor the skipping rope, nor *Les Graces* sticks, nor the bat and ball either. We should have to work hard in those days, I promise you."

"Still, anything is better than school," murmured Agatha. And now the great clock on the stairs struck nine, which

it always did very slowly and deliberately; and the moment it had finished, Miss Montague made her appearance.

This lady had a soft sweet voice, and winning manners, that might have been supposed irresistible; and to do Charles and Agatha justice, they both loved and respected her, and sometimes did every thing in their power to oblige her.

But the wicked fairy Discontent can often, by the touch of her wand, cause our real blessings to become objects of dislike, while she entices our hearts to the pursuit of some fancied good. On this unlucky morning, the picture of John and Nancy Fletcher filling their basket with cowslips in the wood, or resting under the shadow of some spreading tree, took full possession of the children's minds; and they greeted their governess with as much ill humour as though she had come into the schoolroom for the purpose of doing them a serious injury. Charles remembered the hot weather, and Agatha her headache, and they assailed Miss Montague with a hundred complaints.

"Do just feel how my temples beat and throb," cried Agatha; while Charles threw himself languidly on the window-seat, and declared he was so tired he did not know what to do.

Miss Montague saw at once how it was; but she very wisely tried first the effects of soothing and encouraging words. She laid her hand caressingly on Agatha's forehead, and pushing back her dark clustering hair, kissed her with the greatest tenderness. "I am very sorry you are not well, my dear little girl," said she, "but try to make the best of it, and prove yourself a philosopher, like the great man we were reading about the other day."

"A child of ten is never expected to be a philosopher," replied Agatha peevishly; "and besides, I hate lessons," added she, lowering her voice.

"You forget," returned Miss Montague, "that little people can often do very great things; and if you conquer

your faults while you are young you may become as much loved and esteemed as the best philosopher that ever lived."

These words had a beneficial effect on the minds of the two children. Agatha took up her book in right earnest; and Charles' pencil was heard travelling over his slate at railway speed. But alas! this state of things did not last long. A small voice, so small and low that they supposed it to be their own thoughts, whispered in their ears, "Nancy and John Fletcher are so happy in the wood, and the cowslips are so sweet, and the violets so blue, and the green shade so cool and pleasant, and your lessons are so dull, and your school-room so hot." And here the voice died away, and the fairy Discontent—for it was no other—glided invisibly through the open window.

It would have been strange indeed had the children really seen the ugly creature, fluttering about in the bright sunshine; for though so tiny, she had a face full of wrinkles and furrows, and her forehead was bound with hemlock, and in her hand she held a phial containing a poisonous drug. Whenever she whispered her wicked words in your ear, she would likewise drop one single drop of this deadly juice. Then a little cloud would gather over the blue sky of your happiness, and keep getting larger and larger, until at length it overspread it altogether.

So it was on the present occasion with Charles and Agatha. Charles began to draw heads on his slate, and then added a house, and fishpond and garden, and little boys and girls at play; and when his governess remonstrated, he pushed impatiently at the table and upset the ink over his sister's copy book. And Agatha made one mistake after another in her writing, and the letters went some up and some down, just as it happened, and her reading was a slovenly drawl, and her sum altogether wrong, and all this was interspersed with continual complaints of hard work and a bad headache.

Miss Montague now called Agatha to repeat her dates.

"O it is not the right morning for dates, I am quite sure," cried both the children at once; "we never say dates on a Tuesday."

"I insist on your doing as you are bid," returned Miss Montague, whose patience was by this time nearly exhausted.

"I won't say mine," said Charles sullenly; "nobody shall make me say dates on a Tuesday."

"It is really much too bad of you, Miss Montague," whimpered Agatha; "because our heads ache, and we wish to have done sooner, you are more severe than ever, and won't excuse a single lesson."

"And do you suppose that a slight indisposition can be made an excuse for idleness, rudeness, or inattention? How are you to meet the real troubles of life, if you never accustom yourselves to bear the smallest inconvenience with patience and fortitude?"

Still Agatha did not offer to fetch her book of dates; and Charles continued to lounge upon the window-seat, with a face drawn into a thousand lines of discontent and misery.

All this while the sun shone cheerily, and the birds fluttered to and from their little nests, feeding their young, or carolling joyously in the tree tops; for no wicked fairy had dropped her poison in their ear. The bees too were all at work humming and buzzing from flower to flower, and trying to fill their cells with the golden stores of summer. All were happy and content, and there was no cloud to be seen save that one which made the really handsome faces of the two children quite ugly and disagreeable.

At this critical moment the door opened, and who should enter but mamma, her face radiant with smiles, and an open letter in her hand.

"My dear children," she began, but the rebellious attitude of Charles and Agatha caused her to stop abruptly. "I am afraid your pupils are giving you trouble," said she to Miss

Montague, "and if so, this invitation cannot be meant for them."

She then read as follows:—

"MY DEAR MRS. FALKLAND,

"I am planning a very charming fête on the lawn this afternoon, in honour of Julia's birthday, and as I wish all my good industrious little neighbours to enjoy the treat, I hope you will allow Charles and Agatha to favour us with their company. We are going to have dancing, music, and all sorts of games, and the whole affair is to conclude with a magic lantern and fire-works. Hoping nothing will prevent the dear children's visit,

Believe me, Dear Madam,

Very sincerely yours,

LOUISA MELVILLE"

When Mrs. Falkland began to read the note the faces of the two children brightened up with joyful expectation, for they had long wished to see the park and grounds of Lady Melville; and she herself was so amiable, that it was delightful to be with her. But conscience very soon reminded them how little they deserved the pleasure; and when their mamma enquired what answer she should send, Charles looked at Agatha, and Agatha at Charles, and then they both blushed and hung down their heads.

Agatha at length stammered out an excuse on the score of her headache, and Charles declared loudly that his French exercise, so much too difficult, had been the cause of all the mischief.

"Are your lessons finished?" asked Mrs. Falkland, for though the most affectionate of mothers, she never suffered her children's faults to go unpunished.

"We have not had time," whimpered Agatha.

"And mamma," added Charles, "it is so hot, and I am so tired, and we never do say dates on a Tuesday."

"I am afraid you have been neither industrious nor obedient," said Mrs. Falkland gravely, "or your lessons would have been done. Lady Melville invites only good

and industrious children to her fête, and as you do not merit that title, I shall write to decline the invitation."

"O no, no!" cried the children, "pray, please, dear kind good mamma," and they clung vehemently to Mrs. Falkland's dress, "we will be so good to-morrow, and say double lessons, indeed we will, and never be idle again all the rest of our lives. O do let us go—just this once—only this once."

Miss Montague, who dearly loved her pupils, joined very good-naturedly in their petition; but alas! mamma was inflexible. She saw with concern how habits of sloth and inattention were becoming more and more visible in the conduct of her children, and she wished to check the growing evil. She therefore turned a deaf ear to their entreaties, and withdrawing herself from their grasp, took the hand of Miss Montague and led her from the room.

When Charles and Agatha saw that their mamma was really gone, they burst out into a passionate flood of tears, and gave vent to their angry feelings in a great many naughty and rebellious expressions. Agatha tore her copy-book to pieces, and Charles threw his slate on the floor, and trampled to his heart's content on the unfortunate French exercise.

"It would never have happened if we had been the game-keeper's children," said Agatha, sobbing piteously.

"No more it would," replied Charles; "I would give every thing I possess, if some kind fairy would but change us into John and Nancy Fletcher, for I am persuaded to be gentlemen's children is the greatest misfortune in the world."

CHAPTER II.

THE FAIRY DISCONTENT IN THE WOOD.

THE woods in spring are indeed, as Agatha had said, truly delightful; for here the song of birds is never still, and the trees with their fresh young leaves seem to dance and make merry in the sunlight. On every side are pleasant little nooks where violets grow, and from the mossy turf beneath your feet, the hyacinth and pale anemone, breathe forth their delicate perfume. Who does not love to watch the squirrels gambolling in the branches, to hear the chirp of the grasshopper, the tapping of the woodpecker, and above all, the unvarying but welcome note of the cuckoo, telling us the same old story, that

"Winter's cold is gone and past,
Sunny summer come at last."

Close by the wood was a meadow, golden with cowslips; and in this treasury, John and Nancy Fletcher had worked for many days, going and coming, alternately with their basket full and empty, and singing all the time, gaily as the lark that carolled in the blue sky overhead.

This morning, however, they walked on in silence, not caring to notice either birds or flowers, or even their favourite brook that made music as it went along, and seemed to vanish in the distance like a thread of silver. Their little hearts were sad, and no wonder, for the wicked fairy Discontent was buzzing about them, poisoning every source of innocent and childish pleasure.

"Do you know," said John, after he had carelessly plucked a few cowslips, and as though his work was ended,

flung himself lazily on the grass, "do you know, Nancy, what I am thinking about?"

"No," replied his sister rather crossly; "I only see you are letting me get all the cowslips myself, and that is not a bit kind of you."

"O never mind the cowslips," said John; "do you *know* I have been thinking as we came along what a very hard life we do lead."

"O no, no," said Nancy in rather a hesitating voice; for the black drop was beginning to take effect, and the cloud to rise in her mind.

"Yes we do," said John, growing very decided; "think how early we get up in a morning, summer and winter, and how we are always at work, and never have any time for play as—as—other children have; and think what a poor little house our's is compared to other people's, and how"—

"O John," cried his sister, laughing, "how you do go on; come, there's a good lad, and help me get cowslips. See, we have not half filled the basket."

"The sun is so hot, and I am so tired," said John; "besides, I don't see why I should gather cowslips any more than that smart young gentleman at the hall, who is a bigger boy than I am."

"But he is rich," said Nancy, in a soothing tone, "and we are poor, and must work for our living."

"I hate to be poor, and work for my living," grumbled the discontented boy. "I dare say those little children never do any thing they don't like."

"Don't you remember," cried Nancy, "what Miss Agatha said about learning lessons, and how cross and miserable she looked?"

"But I should not care how many lessons I had to learn, if I might have such a fine house and garden as they have, and servants to wait upon me, and smart clothes to wear,

and all sorts of good things to eat, and a carriage to ride in whenever I chose."

"If I had been Miss Agatha," said Nancy with a sigh, "I should have been a great deal happier than she is."

"Of course you would," replied John, "it's a pity we were not born gentlefolks, just to show them how contented we should be."

"I wish we could change places with them," said Nancy, who was now growing very unhappy, "and then we should not have this great basket of cowslips to fill. I dare say they are doing nothing but enjoying themselves, and I am so tired, I am sure we shall never have done."

While the children were thus indulging their foolish complaints the sun mounted higher and higher, until he poured upon them his full meridian rays. Still they lay idly on the grass, heedless of the flight of time, or the performance of the task enjoined them by their mother. Soon the shadows grew longer across the meadow, and the birds who had crept into their nests during the noonday heat, warbled forth their songs afresh from wood and spray. John and Nancy felt now some touches of repentance, and tried by great exertions to redeem the hours they had lost.

"But mother told us to be home by three," cried Nancy, "and I'm sure it's long past that already; so we'd best get home as fast as we can."

"And be scolded into the bargain," said John, glancing into the nearly empty basket, "though I'll be bound we've done a deal more than the little folks at the hall."

Then with gloomy faces, far different from the smiling looks with which they had set out in the morning, the discontented children turned their steps homeward.

The gamekeeper's cottage was situated about half a mile from the wood, and was the prettiest little spot to be seen in all the country round. It was a low whitewashed building, with a thatched roof, to which the roses and honey-

suckles had climbed, nay, had even twined themselves about the chimney. Before it lay a large garden, full of old-fashioned flowers; for Mrs. Fletcher prided herself on her garden, and felt a glow of honest pleasure when the neighbours stopped on their way to church to inhale the fragrance of her pinks, lavender, and double gilliflowers.

Mrs. Fletcher herself was a comfortable, motherly, hard-working dame, with a good-humoured face, and broad sinewy arms that seemed formed for labour. On the present occasion she was sitting spinning in the doorway, dressed in a dark stuff gown, her Sunday best, clean white apron, and spruce cap, in which sundry ends of ribbon, carefully washed and ironed, were being made to do their final duty; and as she turned her wheel, she cast from time to time a rather impatient look at the great Dutch clock, that went on tick-ticking with the most imperturbable gravity.

"How's this, Nance, not gone yet?" asked her husband, who now came in through the garden gate.

"Why, isn't it provoking;" cried the good woman, glad of an opportunity to give vent to her feelings; "I've cleaned myself all ready, and should have gone an hour ago, but those children hav'n't come back yet, and I can't leave the baby."

"You told them, I suppose," said the gamekeeper, as he looked in the drawer for his hammer and nails.

"I just think I did," replied his wife shortly, "so seldom as I go out anywhere! I charged Nancy: says I, be sure, my girl, to get back early, for I promised to step over to neighbour Grant's this afternoon, and see her lass who's just come from service; and here it is five o'clock."

"I told Jack to dig over that potatoe bed afore dark," said the gamekeeper, "and see to fetching the cow from the meadow yonder. I suppose I shall have to fetch her myself."

At this moment John and Nancy made their appearance,

slowly dragging themselves along as if the basket they carried between them had weighed, at least a hundred-fold. They looked so tired and miserable that their mother, forgetting for a moment her anger and disappointment, anxiously asked what was the matter.

"Nothing, mother, only we are so dead tired," said John, flinging himself down at the first fence.

"There hadn't need to be dead tired, with getting a few cowslips, my lad," said his mother.

"And now, Nancy," said Mrs. Fletcher, beginning to bustle about; "let's look how many we've got. A fine lot I have, seeing you've had time to get all the cowslips in the wood."

"They be nearly all over mother," said Nancy, in a discontented tone.

Mrs. Fletcher pulled open the basket, where, to her great surprise and indignation, but a few withered flowers lay at the bottom, not enough to be worth the picking.

"Why bless my heart, Nancy," cried she, administering a hearty cuff to both the children at the same moment; "what have you been about all the forenoon day, and bring home such a paltry quantity as this?"

"The sun was so melting," said John, holding his hands to his ears very passionately; "and we had to stop so at work like slaves."

"And never have any holidays as all the other children," whined Nancy.

"Holidays! work!" echoed the mother, looking sternly from the basket to the children. "You may as well not provoke me. How are you to get bread and cheese? I should like to know, unless you do work."

"The little children at the Hall don't work," replied John, in a sulky tone.

"Come, come," said the grandmother, "the work of this Jack, my lad, then know's what a little work makes a man."

go and dig over them potatoes, afore dark, and no more words about it."

"I want my tea first," said Jack, without moving.

"You've had quite as much victuals as you've earned for one day," replied his father; "so you had best look sharp."

John did not move, and Nancy, whom her mother had bidden sit down and mend her father's coat, kept putting her fingers through the hole, with no other purpose than to make it larger.

"It's no good you're doing like that, Nance," said her mother; "Fetch me the bundle of cloth from the cupboard, and I'll fix you on a patch."

Nancy moved slowly to the cupboard, and in her clumsy way of opening the door, she pushed against the baby's cot, and nearly upset it. The child was sleeping peacefully, with a smile on its little cherub face, but awakened by this rude push, it began to cry and scream most lustily. Now the roll of cloth lay behind Dame Fletcher's best set of tea-things (a very improper place, but it had been put there by Nancy herself to save trouble). In her careless manner of dragging it out, she dislodged the whole array, and cups, saucers, and teapot made a somerset, partly on to the floor, and partly into the baby's cradle. This catastrophe had the effect of restoring the children to their senses; and John, after making an ineffectual attempt to save the falling crockery, seized the baby, whose cries were deafening, and carrying it fairly out of doors, tried to quiet it. Dame Fletcher stormed and scolded, and first pushed Nancy out of the way, and then rated and soundly boxed her for not coming to help. No greater damage was done to the tea-things than the fracture of a few saucers, and the total destruction of the cream-jug; and when the fragments had been carefully picked up and stowed away to be mended, order was somewhat restored. The baby, who had cried itself to sleep, was again laid in its cot; and Dame Fletcher

having charged her daughter not to stir until she had finished her task, put on her best cloak and bonnet, and set off to have tea with her neighbour.

"Ah, John," said Nancy, when at last they were left alone; "this would never have happened if we had been the children at the Hall."

"And I should'nt have had this potatoe bed to dig neither," said her brother, as he laid the spade over his shoulder, for he no longer dared to dispute his father's orders; "how I wish some kind fairy would but change us into Master Charles and Miss Agatha, for I'm sure to be gamekeeper's children is the worst luck we could have."

CHAPTER III.

THE WISH GRATIFIED.

ONE—two—three—four—five, struck the great clock on the stairs, and out of bed jumped Nancy Fletcher; but almost as soon jumped in again, and hiding herself under the bed-clothes, lay quite still and frightened. Presently one bright eye peeped from the covering, and then the other, and at length her little wondering face appeared again, and she stole softly on to the floor, and began to feel everything to convince herself that all she saw was real.

It was the prettiest, snuggest, daintiest room that any one can possibly imagine.

There was a little bed with curtains white as the driven snow, and the carpet was figured all over with lilies and roses, that seemed almost as fresh as if blooming in the open air.

Nancy thought she had never seen anything so beautiful as the paper on the walls, the marble top of the washing-stand, or the trim array of scent bottles that stood on the toilet table, and the contents of which she tasted in succession. Having partially satisfied her curiosity, she looked enquiringly into the mirror, and immediately started back in the greatest alarm. What a wonderful thing had happened! Nancy could not at first believe her senses, for instead of her own round plump face, that of Miss Agatha Falkland was reflected in the mysterious glass. This was odd indeed, and the child began to feel as much terrified as when she first opened her eyes. Suddenly an idea occurred to her.

"It is the fairy," she cried, clapping her hands with glee, "the good kind fairy who has changed little Nancy Fletcher into Miss Agatha Falkland! How very nice! I shall have no more hard work, no getting cowslips, no patching father's old coat. And how pretty I am!" she continued, running again to the glass, and admiring her white complexion and bright sparkling eyes.

Her ecstasy lasted a considerable time; and when it had in some measure abated, she stole gently into the next room, and found that it contained an equally pretty white bed, in which Master Charles Falkland lay fast asleep. She did not dare to disturb him, and was hastily retreating, when the boy awoke, and rubbing his eyes in amazement—

"Father—mother—Nancy—where am I?" cried he, as he flung himself about, trying to understand the real state of the case.

"Do you know, Jack," said Nancy, half laughing and half crying, "I really believe we are changed into Miss and Master Falkland!"

"Are we, are we?" cried John; "how grand that will be to be sure!" and he jumped out of bed and danced about in an ecstasy of glee.

After a few moments he ran to the window, and pulling away the blind, "Look, Nancy, only see what a fine garden, and what lots of roses and tulips, though I don't see no gilliflowers neither. Let's make haste and dress ourselves, and run down and play."

His proposal was gladly seconded by Nancy, who scampered back to her own room, and opening all the drawers, began to hunt for Miss Agatha's smart clothes. She found a very elegant silk dress, which she immediately seized upon, and resolved to wear on this her first entrance into the fashionable world. A delicate pair of slippers she also dragged from their hiding-place; and after many attempts, succeeded in clasping a row of pearls round her neck.

"Come, make haste," said John, who had finished his toilet first, "come, make haste, I want to be off;" and then putting his hands in his pockets, he walked to the window and began to whistle with all his might.

"What do you children mean by making such a racket, and disturbing the whole house, your mamma included?" cried a voice, so sharp and cutting, that as John and Nancy afterwards said it almost made their eyes water; and immediately a tall thin person bundled up in a shawl and dressing-gown, burst into the room.

"What's all this about," said the new comer with increasing asperity—"you Miss Agatha, a putting on of your best silk frock when all decent folks are asleep in their comfortable warm beds, and dizenning yourself out at the glass like any princess!"

At the first alarm, John had fled into his own room, and hidden himself in the bed-curtains; but his curiosity now prevailed over his caution, and venturing back for a peep, he was instantly detected.

"And pray, Master Charles, what might you be about?" asked the damsel, with an air of mock civility; "this is some prank of yours, I suppose, leading Miss Agatha into mischief."

"I meant no harm," said John, utterly confounded by this unforeseen mischance, "I only wanted to play in the garden."

"Don't tell me—play in the garden indeed, and it only just gone five! You please march back into bed, Miss Agatha," said the waiting-maid, stripping Nancy of her finery, and tying her night cap so tight that the child was nearly strangled, "and let's hear no more of you till it's right time to get up, or I'll complain to your governess, and get a long task set you for your pains."

"It's very hard we mayn't get up in a morning," grumbled Nancy, as the door closed on Mrs. Rachael, the

cross waiting-maid, whose slumbers they had so unwittingly disturbed.

"It's quite impossible to go to sleep again," said John, turning himself over and over to find a comfortable place; "I almost wish I was milking father's cow in the paddock, for I hate lying in bed like this."

The time did indeed pass heavily enough—six—seven o'clock struck, and though many sounds were heard in the house, no Mrs. Rachael appeared. Nancy counted the flowers on the carpet backwards and forwards, while John lay staring at the pretty china figures on the mantelpiece opposite, until they almost seemed to move. At length, footsteps were heard; this time somebody really was coming, and to their great joy, the ill-tempered waiting-woman again entered the room. The children sprang up in a moment, eagerly anticipating the pleasures of Mrs. Falkland's beautiful garden. But, alas! the operation of being dressed was far more trying and tedious than they had imagined.

"Oh! you hurt me, you hurt me so bad!" cried Nancy, as Mrs. Rachael, with no very gentle hand, disengaged the papers from her hair; "I wish I might do it myself."

But the remonstrance was totally disregarded by Mrs. Rachael, who without moving a muscle of her face, continued to pull at the refractory curl, until Nancy could bear it no longer, and began to sob and cry most piteously.

"Just let that child's head alone," exclaimed John, appearing in the doorway that separated the two rooms, "or I'll teach you the reason why."

"I think the children are both gone mad together," said Mrs. Rachael, looking at John with a mixture of contempt and anger. "Be so kind, Master Charles, as to step back into your own room, and don't be meddling and making with what does not concern you."

So saying, she pushed the young gentleman rather unceremoniously into his chamber, and locking the door, left

him to finish his toilet as best he could. But as all troubles come to an end sometime, so this terrible affair of dressing was at length completed. Mrs. Rachael released John from his prison; and having administered sundry jerks and pulls to the different parts of his attire, pronounced him "for a wonder, fit to be seen."

"Come along," said John, taking his sister by the hand, "we'll have rare sport in the garden;" and they both set off skipping and jumping down stairs.

But Mrs. Rachael was after them, quick as thought. "Rare sport, indeed," cried she disdainfully; "I wonder, Master Charles, where you learn such low expressions? You'll please to sport, as you call it, into the schoolroom first of all, and say your task to your governess, who has been waiting for you this half-hour."

Blank dismay was painted on the children's faces, and tears of disappointment began to roll down Nancy's cheek.

"What, no play at all," said she sorrowfully.

"O please let us go, if it's only for a moment," cried John.

But Mrs. Rachael was not used, as she said, "to waste her breath in argument," and pointing to a door opposite, she scowled so angrily that neither John nor Nancy dared any longer to dispute her authority. As the door opened, Nancy crept behind her brother, and felt at that moment as though she would willingly part with all her grandeur, to be rid of the uncomfortable sensation that made her heart flutter so strangely.

Miss Montague gently reproved her pupils for their want of punctuality; but all the time she was speaking, their little wondering eyes were busy examining the room, which seemed to them so large and so lofty, that they thought their father's cottage might have stood within it; the books and the globes by turns excited John's admiration, while Nancy was more attracted by an old-fashioned cabinet,

which she supposed might contain Miss Agatha's play-things. The breakfast bell now summoned them down stairs; and on the way Miss Montague warned them to behave especially well, as Sir Harry Bartram and Miss Adeliza Curzon, two old friends of their mamma, had arrived that morning at the hall.

The children shrank back half frightened at the powdered footman, who waited at the bottom of the stairs to usher them into the room; but when they saw themselves in a splendid apartment, filled with real ladies and gentlemen, their courage failed them altogether. Nancy ran behind Miss Montague, and hid her face in her gown; but John, feeling ashamed of his cowardice, resolved boldly to face the danger. He determined, too, to give the gentry, as he called them, a specimen of his politeness, and nothing daunted by the angry looks of Mrs. Falkland, he stepped before his governess, and laying hold of the front lock of his hair, made a very clumsy bow.

"Capital, my little man," cried Sir Harry Bartram, who dearly loved a joke, "I congratulate you on your very original mode of making your entrée."

"Did I do it well, sir?" asked John, with the greatest simplicity in the world.

"Capitally! you could not have done it better. Your son, Mrs. Falkland, will turn out a fine fellow one of these days."

"I don't see any sign of it in his rude and unaccountable behaviour this morning, Sir Harry," replied Mrs. Falkland, colouring with vexation.

All this time Miss Montague was engaged in struggling with Nancy, who clung quite tight round her, and prevented her from moving.

"For shame, for shame Agatha," cried Mrs. Falkland, as she took the little girl by the arm, and forcibly disengaged her. "I insist upon you instantly speaking to Miss Adeliza Curzon."

Nancy drew up her face as though she were about to burst into a fit of crying, when John, whose good nature was roused at the sight of his sister's distress, ran up to her, and whispered quite loud enough for all the company to hear, "You've no need to be frightened; they won't hurt you."

At this speech, Sir Harry walked to the window, and began to make a hundred incoherent remarks about the weather, while Miss Adeliza Curzon, who was a very grand lady indeed, tossed her head disdainfully, and murmured something about manners, and the children of her friend, the marchioness, being so different.

Nancy was quite reassured by her brother's encouraging remark, and allowing herself to be led to the table, went through the ceremony of introduction in a simple childish way, that almost re-established her in Mrs. Falkland's good graces.

John had taken his seat by Sir Harry Bartram, and fancying all the company were delighted with his wit, began to laugh and talk to his new friend with the utmost familiarity. This was greatly to the discomposure of Miss Adeliza's nerves, for every time she raised her cup of chocolate with a languid air to her lips, some outrageous speech from that "rude, strange, unaccountable boy" caused her to set it down again.

"Do you walk to-day, Miss Curzon?" asked Sir Harry, who was amusing himself with the young lady's affected airs.

"O dear no," she replied; "I would on no account expose myself to this intolerable heat, not even to oblige my friend the marchioness."

"Then you have no romantic attachment to green fields, and banks of primroses, and purling brooks, and all the pretty things poets tell us of," said Sir Harry, smiling.

"They are all very well in a picture, but quite different

in nature," returned Miss Adeliza, pulling to pieces the rose she had worn in her bosom.

"I always envy the village children, going with their little baskets to gather cowslips," said Mrs. Falkland; "they have such happy smiling faces, and seem so thoroughly to enjoy the task."

"Cowslips are about over now, ma'am," said Nancy, timidly.

"Indeed!" replied Sir Harry, turning to the little speaker; "I dare say, Miss Agatha, you are far more learned than we are in the matter of flowers; and gather many pretty nosegays too from the wood yonder."

"We gets 'em for wine, sir," interposed John, who thought this a good opportunity of displaying his wisdom.

"And Miss Agatha uses it for her doll's feasts, I suppose," said Sir Harry, laughing.

"O no; we never have wine except mother's got company," replied John gravely, his knowledge of the subject leading him into an indiscretion.

At this speech, the powdered footman, who was waiting behind his mistress's chair, tittered in a very audible manner, and even Sir Harry looked somewhat disconcerted. Mrs. Falkland coloured and frowned, and did all in her power to prevent her son from joining in the conversation; and Miss Montague, terribly at a loss to account for his uncouth behaviour, was secretly devising means of bringing him to his senses.

To the unspeakable joy of both these ladies, breakfast was at length over. Mrs. Falkland, but too glad to escape from her mortifying position, invited her guests to inspect her new green-house; and Miss Montague, overwhelmed with confusion, took the opportunity of retreating with her pupils to the schoolroom.

CHAPTER IV.

ADVENTURES OF JOHN AND NANCY.

"THIS will never do," said Mrs. Falkland, as she entered the schoolroom, the first moment of leisure; "your pupils, Miss Montague, must conduct themselves like ladies and gentlemen, or be banished from the parlour altogether."

Poor John was sitting at the table, with his sum before him, and his face expressive of the most intense bewilderment; while Nancy was poring over a large atlas, and vainly endeavouring to find Greenland in the Mediterranean Sea.

"Their behaviour this morning is indeed most extraordinary," replied Miss Montague; "nor can I account in any way for their open violation of the commonest rules of politeness."

"I meant no harm, Miss, I'm sure," said John, rubbing his eyes with the cuff of his coat.

"I forbid you to address Miss Montague in that impertinent manner," said Mrs. Falkland peremptorily; "when your papa comes home I must appeal to him for assistance, since all my efforts to recall you to your duty seem fruitless."

Nancy hung down her head, and large tears began to drop upon her atlas. As her finger wandered at random over the lands, seas, gulfs, and bays of Europe, she was inwardly contrasting her present situation with the happy life she had led in dame Fletcher's cottage, before the wicked fairy dropped the poison in her ear.

"I should have been helping mother wash to-day," said she to herself, "and that's not half such hard work as this geography."

"Digging potatoes is nothing compared to this puzzling sum," thought John, as Mrs. Falkland quitted the school-room; "and I'm sure mother always told me I was the best behaved lad in the parish: so she need'nt be at me for ever-lasting."

"Bring me the grammar, Charles, and let me examine you in the rules of syntax," said Miss Montague.

"Schools of what, Miss?" asked John, very much perplexed.

"I will not allow you to call me Miss," said Miss Montague; "it is a vulgar habit you have never before been guilty of."

John was just going to make another bow to pacify his offended governess, and testify his readiness to comply with her wishes; but recollecting the disaster of the morning, he stopped himself in time, and stood up the very picture of meekness and submission.

"Take your hands out of your pockets," said Miss Montague angrily; "and do not look another way when I am speaking to you. Now, tell me the meaning of the word syntax?"

A problem in Euclid would not have been more impossible. John looked in succession at the ceiling, the walls, the fire-place, the chairs, the table, as if he expected they would furnish him with a solution. All were profoundly silent, and Miss Montague's eyes were fixed upon him with so severe an expression that he became positively nervous.

"Syntax, syntax," he kept repeating to himself, but not a single idea was attached to the sound. At length a happy thought occurred to him.

"Tin tacks," he cried, with a smile of exultation, "I knows 'em; they're little nails."

Having delivered this wise speech, John grinned with delight, and rubbing his hands together, waited impatiently for his governess to propound another question.

"Intolerable!" exclaimed Miss Montague, colouring with

indignation. "Take your book, sir; and if you cannot say that page correctly in half an hour, you shall be shut up within your own room the remainder of the day."

John stared in blank astonishment.

"I wonder what I've done now," said he to himself; "there's no pleasing her, do what I will."

Nancy was then called to say her geography; and after a wholesome shower of tears had fallen upon the land of Egypt, and she had lost her way three times in the Great Desert, the terrible affair was concluded. Reading followed—an equally formidable task, and drew from Miss Montague a series of lectures on the sounding of the letter H, that in Nancy's alphabet had neither a habitation nor a name.

In the midst of this dreary array of lessons, poor little Nancy from time to time cast longing glances at the bright sunshine outside; and the thought of green fields, and her mother's garden, and the healthful exercise her limbs were wont to enjoy, occurred to her mind.

At length, to the unspeakable delight of both the children, whose heads ached most piteously, the great clock on the stairs struck twelve. John's lesson had been said, and all the books neatly arranged in their respective order on the shelves.

"And now," said Miss Montague, "you may play in the garden for an hour."

Scarcely had she pronounced the words, than the children, overcome with joy, darted through the door, and shutting it in her face, rushed down the steps into the lawn, and began to jump and caper about like wild animals let loose from a cage. John, to display his agility, leaped backwards and forwards over the flower-beds; and Nancy could think of no greater amusement, than rolling herself down the grassy slopes, in full view of the company who were seated at the drawing-room window.

"For shame, Agatha, for shame, Charles," cried their mamma and Miss Montague, in the same breath; "if you cannot invent a more refined way of diverting yourselves you must return to your lessons."

"There is something original about these children even in their play," said Sir Harry, laughing; while Miss Adeliza Curzon retreated to a corner of the room that she might not be obliged to witness such ungenteel behaviour.

"We will not play here at all," said John to his sister in a whisper; "she'll do nothing but scold us. Let us go into the fields."

They walked quietly to the gate, and had just succeeded in making their exit, when a new enemy appeared in the shape of Mrs. Rachael, who called loudly to them to come back.

"What do you mean, Miss Agatha," cried she, "by tearing about without your bonnet, to make yourself as brown as any gipsy?"

"I'll fetch my bonnet directly," said Nancy; "so please don't be angry. Miss Montague told us we might go."

Mrs. Rachael upon this relaxed her hold, and after delivering a long lecture to the children, who were all impatience to be gone, she suffered them to depart without further molestation.

"And now we are free at last," said John, as they ran out into the green lane that led to the village.

"I wonder we were so foolish as to envy the children at the hall," said Nancy; "only think what a life they have of it."

"Every body seems to scold from morning till night," returned John. "I never knew any body so cross as that Madam Falkland."

"Except Mrs. Rachael," said Nancy, with a sigh.

But the conversation was here interrupted by the merry sound of voices; and John and Nancy saw before them a

group of children carrying a May-pole, prettily ornamented with bows of ribbon and garlands of flowers. The rustics were clad in their Sunday best, and their rosy faces shone with delight. They turned into a field leading to a farmhouse, a short distance from the road, and John and Nancy followed, all eagerness to join the sport.

When the little villagers reached the garden in front of the house, an arch-looking lad drew forth his fiddle and began to play with all his might, the rest dancing gaily round the May-pole. The farmer's wife came out to see what was going on; but as soon as she perceived Nancy and John, she dropped a curtsey, and invited them to walk in, and view the dancing through her parlour window.

"And perhaps the young master would like to look round the farm-yard bye and bye," said she, as she carefully dusted the chairs for the gentlefolks to sit down.

"Yes, that I should, above all things," cried John; "but can't I go directly?"

"I had rather stay here, and look at the May-pole," said Nancy, who was inwardly longing to join her old play-mates.

Once arrived in the farm-yard, John was supremely happy. All his troubles were forgotten, and even the rules of syntax faded from his mind. He ran in and out of the sheds, stroked the cows, patted the horses, climbed the haystack, and insisted on taking a turn with the threshers in the barn. The time passed very quickly; and as he was thus amusing himself, he espied the farmer's boy, mounted on a cart-horse, without saddle or bridle, preparing to drive the cows to pasture. John was instantly seized with a strong desire to assist; and made known his wish in a very peremptory manner.

"Let me go along with you," said he to the lad; "there's nothing I love like driving cows."

The lad stared, and thought the young 'squire was slightly deranged.

"I think you'd better not, sir," said he; "the missis would be so angry if she knew it."

"I've done it times enough before now," said John, "so hold your tongue, and just help me up. Don't you see I'm a young gentleman, and ought not to be contradicted?"

The boy, a raw country lad, had been recently taken into the farmer's service, and supposing Master Charles to be a spoilt child, whom it would be dangerous to thwart, he ventured no further remonstrance. John, delighted to gain his point so easily, took off his smart jacket lest he should damage it; and his companion having helped him to mount, the well-matched pair, with many noisy vociferations, drove the cows out of the yard.

John felt perfectly at home in the society of his new friend the ploughboy, and they jogged along conversing with the utmost familiarity.

But this delightful intercourse was doomed to a speedy interruption, for a turn in the lane brought them in sight of an elegant carriage and pair, which was coming directly towards them. Now, by an unlucky chance, who should this carriage contain but Mrs. Falkland, Miss Adeliza Curzon, and Sir Harry Bartram, who had chosen that identical road for their morning drive.

Miss Adeliza Curzon reclined in a languid attitude, her cambric handkerchief and her smelling bottle in her lap. Suddenly the delicate fringed parasol that protected her complexion from the sun was dropped, and she raised her glass to her eye with a quickness that was almost incredible.

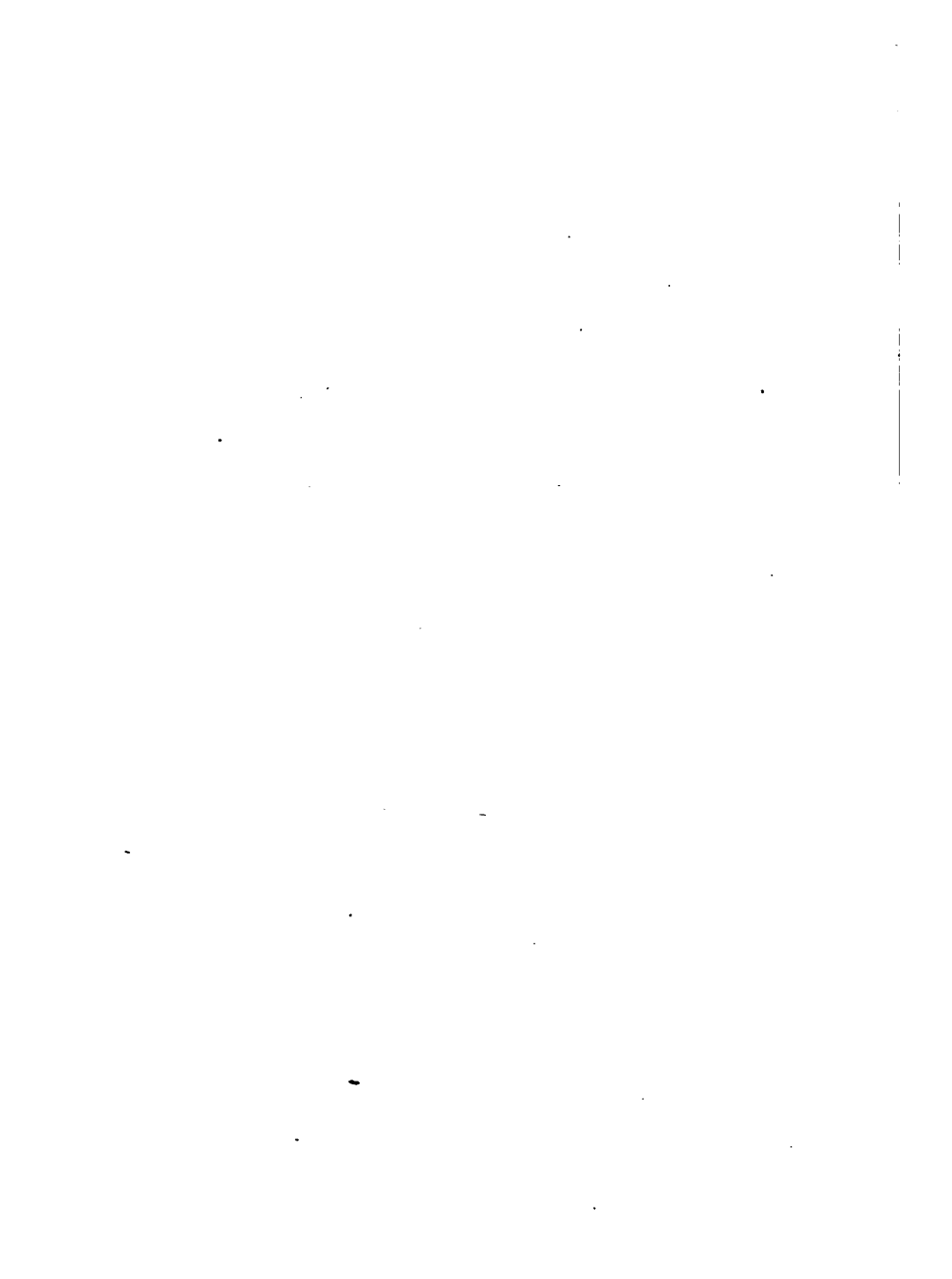
"Dear me," said she, "how very extraordinary—but no—it cannot be;" and she threw herself back and applied her smelling bottle, as though overpowered by her exertion.

Sir Harry stood up in the carriage, and looked in the direction of the young lady's glass.

"Is it those two little urchins yonder, perched on the back of the cart-horse, that attracted so much of your attention?" he asked.



John and the Plough-boy.



"I firmly believe," replied Miss Adeliza, in a tone of great solemnity, "that one of those little urchins as you are pleased to call them, is no other than Master Charles Falkland."

"You are jesting, surely," returned Mrs. Falkland; "my son would never be guilty of such an impropriety: besides," added she, smiling, "he is too great a coward to mount a horse at all."

John and his companion now approached quite near enough for their features to be distinctly visible; and in their anxiety to clear a passage for the carriage, they made a succession of whoops and halloos, that caused Miss Adeliza to stop her ears, and in an imperious tone command Sir Harry "make the fellows give over."

"Charles! is it possible?" exclaimed Mrs. Falkland, pale with agitation and alarm.

These words awoke John from his dream of enjoyment.

"It's that bothering Mrs. Falkland come again, I declare;" said he to himself, "there's no more good to be done now." And folding his hands, he sat upright on the cart-horse, with a face expressive of the greatest misery and despair, while the farmer's lad, opening his mouth from ear to ear, grinned at the gentry with unabated good humour.

Mrs. Falkland, incensed beyond measure with the two-fold annoyance, turned to the presumptuous rustic, and demanded how he dared encourage her son in his rebellious conduct.

"Master Charles told me he had often done it afore," said the boy, with a dogged simplicity.

This was the climax of poor John's disgrace.

"Get down instantly," said Mrs. Falkland, addressing him with greater asperity; "and since your present manners unfit you for the society of ladies and gentlemen, you may take your seat by the coachman."

John made no reply; but thankful to escape the severe glances that were directed at him from all sides, he dismounted from his ungainly steed, and climbed the dickey with the greatest precipitation.

Scarcely had the party recovered from the violent shock their nerves had received, when the sound of a fiddle greeted their ears; and who should appear by the side of the road but our little friends, the villagers, dancing round the May-pole.

Miss Adeliza Curzon, whose vision on the present occasion seemed gifted with unnatural acuteness, uttered a loud shriek, and the fringed parasol dropped a second time from her hand.

"It is Miss Agatha," cried she: "Miss Agatha Falkland, hand in hand with those vulgar little wretches, dancing round the May-pole!" and she closed her eyes as if she could no longer bear the sight.

It was indeed the fact; for Nancy, unable to be a mere spectator of the sport, had followed the happy group into the lane, where she supposed she might, unmolested, enjoy the treat.

But, alas! no sooner had the dance begun in earnest, and the fiddler, stimulated by the young lady's presence, set up his merriest tune, than the sound of carriage wheels was heard, and almost immediately an angry voice commanded the young rustics to stop.

"Pray do not agitate yourself, my dear Mrs. Falkland," said the good-natured Sir Harry; "it is really a very innocent freak of Miss Agatha. Remember the good old days when kings and queens thought it no indignity to do the same."

"It is a mercy my friend the marchioness is not here," said Miss Adeliza, who still kept her eyes hermetically sealed.

Poor little Nancy saw how it was in a moment; and the melancholy visage of John on the coach-box, did not much tend to dissipate her fears.

"We shall never have any play for that cross Mrs. Falkland," said she, as she wiped her eyes with the corner of her pinafore.

"Come into the carriage, you naughty girl," cried Mrs.

Falkland; "and as soon as we reach home, you and your brother shall receive the punishment you so richly deserve."

Nancy squeezed herself into the corner opposite to Miss Adeliza Curzon, who carefully drew her dress round her, lest she might be contaminated by the touch of that "low, ill-bred child."

"I'd rather ride before Jack on Dobbin any day," thought Nancy, "than in a carriage with folks like this."

At last, to the great relief of the unhappy culprits, the ride was ended. But their day's troubles were not yet over; for, on reaching home, they were consigned to the tender mercies of Mrs. Rachael, to be regaled on bread and water, and then put to bed.

"I thought how it would be this morning," said that amiable personage, as she carried the children off in triumph. "You were planning together to be as naughty as you could, and you see what comes of it."

"I've done nothing wrong as I know of," said John, sulkily; while Nancy begged hard for some of her playthings to amuse herself with, during her imprisonment.

"We don't give naughty girls their playthings, to encourage them to disobey their parents," said Mrs. Rachael. "You may lie and think over your faults; and then you'll have enough to do."

The children lay crying and sobbing in their beds, and earnestly wishing the fairy would undo the mischief she had done, when a light footstep was heard, and Susan, the good-natured housemaid, stole to Nancy's bedside.

"Don't cry any more, Miss Agatha," said she, "and I'll tell you something that will please you."

"Nothing can please me now," said Nancy, in a piteous tone.

"O yes, it will" returned Susan quickly. "I dñst not stop a minute for my life, lest Mrs. Rachael should be after me; but there's going to be a picnic in the wood to-morrow,

and Sir Harry, like a kind gentleman as he is, has begged so hard, that your mamma says you may go; and cook is making all sorts of nice things to take along with you."

"And is Mrs. Rachael going too?" asked Nancy, still in a dismal voice.

"O dear no; James and me's going to wait on the company."

"O that will be delightful," cried Nancy, her spirits reviving at the thought. "Dear kind Susan, I do love you so;" and jumping up in bed, she threw her arms round the neck of the astonished housemaid.

"You must not do so, Miss Agatha, you must not indeed," said she, extricating herself; "it is not proper for a young lady like you: but be sure you don't tell Mrs. Rachael."

"But I must tell Jack," said Nancy, as Susan tripped lightly away; and running into her brother's room, she eagerly imparted to him the charming news.

"I'm glad there's going to be something good to eat, however," said he, when Nancy had finished, "for I'm half pined with only a mouthful of bread and a drink of water to keep life in me."

"And we shall ride in a carriage like ladies and gentlemen," said Nancy, "and play all day long. O how I wish to-morrow was come."

"So do I," said John, "what fun we shall have, for we've never been pleasuring before. Really, it is almost worth being Master Charles and Miss Agatha, after all."

CHAPTER V.

CHARLES AND AGATHA BECOME THE GAMEKEEPER'S CHILDREN.

"PAST six o'clock, and you children yet abed," shouted a hard strong voice up the staircase of the gamekeeper's cottage.

Agatha started and rubbed her eyes, and then started and rubbed her eyes again, but still could not feel quite sure whether she was awake or dreaming. The rays of the sun, uncurtained and unscreened, fell directly on her little bed, that stood in the corner of a tiny room, far different from the one in which she had gone to rest the night before. The floor was of plaster, and had no carpet, the walls no paper, the ceiling a mere patch of whitewash, and the only furniture, a three-legged stool, an old table, and a cracked looking-glass.

How could it be? it certainly was a dream, and no mistake! And yet it was no dream; for at this moment, the face of John Fletcher, as she supposed, peeped through the doorway, wearing a most uncomfortable expression.

"O Agatha," cried he, "what has happened to us? Do you know, I believe the fairy has really changed us! You are not Agatha, you are little Nancy Fletcher; and I am not Charles, but John. What shall we do?"

"What indeed!" said Agatha, sitting upright in bed, and looking helplessly round.

"Do!" cried the same voice, whose loud tones had wakened the children a few minutes ago; "I'll teach you what to do, if you're not down directly." And a stout

healthy-looking woman, with a face of honest good humour that belied her rough words, came noisily up the creaking stairs. "Who do you think is to milk the cow, while you lie abed in this way?" said she, giving Charles a hearty cuff.

"Come my lass, up with you," continued the good woman, turning to Agatha, whose teeth chattered with fright; "your father and I've done breakfast an hour since; so look sharp, or may be we shall quarrel."

So saying, Dame Fletcher stumped down stairs again; and the children very soon heard a great clatter of cups and saucers, as though every thing was being washed up, and put in its place in the neat little corner cupboard.

"Never mind, Agatha," whispered Charles; "we shall like it very much, I am sure. Remember the wood and the cowslips."

"And no school except on Sundays," rejoined Agatha, as she arranged her hair before the cracked looking-glass.

The children dressed themselves as fast as they could; and, proceeding down stairs, came at once into a snug little room, with a cheerful bit of fire, and a round table, on which stood two porringers of milk and bread for their breakfasts. The brick floor was scrubbed to a state of exquisite cleanliness; and you might have seen your face in every article of furniture the cottage contained.

But what delighted the children most, was a pair of stag's horns, fastened by a nail over the old-fashioned chimney-piece, and some strings of bird's eggs, suspended by way of ornament from the ceiling.

The casement window stood open, and the fresh morning air, mingling with the fragrance of Dame Fletcher's posies, came streaming in, and would have inspired sadder hearts than those of Agatha and Charles with cheerfulness and joy. The new milk, and brown bread too, were delicious; and the children began to congratulate each other on the happy change in their fortunes.

"You need not puzzle any more over that tiresome French exercise, Charles; need you?"

"No; nor be tormented with dates or sums, or the Saxon kings, who are the worst of all," returned Charles.

"So they are," exclaimed Agatha, "I never could remember those Saxons; O Charles, how delightful it will be!"

"Have you young 'uns about done?" asked the gamekeeper, looking through the window, with his gun on his shoulder. At this sudden apparition, the children stared in astonishment, and it was some moments before they could sufficiently recollect themselves to make any reply. "I want you to feed the pigs, Jack, the first thing; and then fetch Dobbin up from the barn. Do you hear me, lad?" for Charles sat like a statue, his porringer of milk in his hand, and without the slightest idea in the world of what the gamekeeper expected him to do.

"I wonder what pigs eat?" said Agatha thoughtfully, when the gamekeeper had taken his departure.

"I cannot imagine," replied Charles, in the tone of one who is required to solve a very difficult problem, "I must feed them with something; what is it to be?"

"Donkeys eat cabbages, I know," said Agatha, moving slowly to the door; "and cook gave the lamb some milk and bread, but I never saw any one feed pigs in my life," she added, as though the matter were quite past her comprehension.

"Suppose we try a few cabbages, there would be no great harm done," said Charles, "and see there are plenty growing in the garden."

"I think we had better gather them directly," said Agatha, "for the gamekeeper seemed to be in a hurry, and perhaps the pigs want their breakfasts," added she laughing. Then delighted with their own ingenuity, and eager to try the experiment, the children sallied out of doors.

"What a beautiful garden!" cried Agatha, in ecstasy,

"what splendid roses and gilliflowers, and how sweet the lavender does smell; and only look at the bee-hives! I think this is a perfect little paradise!"

"I think so too," replied Charles, as he made fearful havoc amongst Dame Fletcher's choicest greens; "there, will that be enough, Agatha?"

"Not quite, I think," returned his sister doubtfully, "for pigs, you know, are always considered great eaters."

"What are you meddling with your mother's cabbages for, Jack?" cried the game-keeper, jumping over a low fence that bounded the garden. Charles started at the angry tone in which these words were spoken, and pushing back his cap, felt for the first time how very hot and uncomfortable he had made himself. Moreover, he was quite sure by the expression of the gamekeeper's face, that he had involved himself in a terrible scrape. He looked at Agatha, and then at his spade, and then at the cabbages, and replied in a very humble tone of voice, that he was getting them "for the pigs."

"For the pigs!" echoed the gamekeeper, with a look of blank dismay, "is the boy clean mad, and them greens to last come Michaelmas?"

"O pray don't be angry with him," cried Agatha, her eyes filling with tears, "it was my fault, it was indeed; I told him to do it."

"You did, did you, Miss Nancy?" said the gamekeeper, in a softer tone, for he dearly loved his little girl; "come there's no need to cry about it, either," continued he, patting her head kindly.

"Jack ought to have known better, digging them up by the roots too, as if they were weeds. Well, you'll e'en have to set them again, my lad, so look handy, and then run down to the barn and fetch Dobbin. You can ride him up if you like, only be steady."

"O please let me go too," exclaimed Agatha, "I should like above all things to ride on Dobbin."

"I've no objection, my lass," replied the gamekeeper, "so long as you don't get Jack into any more mischief." So saying, and charging his son on no account to loiter on the road, he walked whistling away; and Charles and Agatha having with the greatest difficulty reset the unlucky cabbages, ran skipping and jumping through the garden-gate. There was no need to enquire the way to the barn, for there it was, not far before them, almost hidden by a pretty clump of trees; and the path led through fields golden with buttercups, and dotted all over with bushes of the snow-white hawthorn.

The children danced merrily on the green sward, and gathered nosegays of wild flowers, and ran after the butterflies that fluttered about enjoying the sunshine. And sometimes they stopped to listen to the lark, or the soft mellow notes of the blackbird, singing in the thicket close by, or to watch the dragon-flies as they darted here and there on the surface of the brook. At length thoroughly tired with play, they sat down to rest under the shade of a spreading oak.

"This is the happiest life any one could wish to lead," said Charles, lying on his back, and staring up into the trees "I hope we shall be the gamekeeper's children all our lives."

"But that reminds me we have quite forgotten Dobbin," cried Agatha, starting up.

"Dear me," said Charles, "how could we be so thoughtless! pray let us make haste, or we shall be in a worse scrape still."

"But we can ride home, you know," said Agatha, as she tried hard to keep up with her brother.

"O yes, you must sit behind me, and hold fast, and then we can gallop away famously."

"Won't it be delightful," cried Agatha, "I think this day's pleasure will never be over."

They now reached the barn, and found Dobbin, a rather ill-conditioned animal, tied to a manger within it.

"Now then, Charles, you must unfasten him," said Agatha, all impatient for her ride.

"I don't quite like the looks of him, to tell you the truth," replied Charles, keeping at the greatest possible distance.

"Surely you are not afraid," said his sister, laughing.

"Afraid, O dear no," said Charles, going just one inch nearer, "there softly now, good Dobbin."

But good Dobbin eyed his new master very maliciously, as though he suspected all was not right, and began to grin and show his teeth in rather a sinister manner.

"I think I dare try," said Agatha, "if you let me take hold of your hand."

They thus crept timidly to the manger; and as the horse stood perfectly still, Charles took courage and attempted to seize the halter. Upon this, Dobbin who did not approve the proceeding, gave his head a sudden shake, which so terrified the children, that they set off running at full speed and did not even stop to look round till they had reached the end of the meadow. Then satisfied that the animal was not coming after them, they flung themselves on the grass quite exhausted and out of breath.

"What shall we do?" said Agatha, half crying with fatigue and fright.

"We must go back to the gamekeeper, and tell him he must come and unfasten the creature himself, for we cannot do it," said Charles, "that would be the best plan, and save us any further trouble."

"No, no, that would never do," cried Agatha, "you forget we are John and Nancy Fletcher now, and must do as he bids us. Come let us make another trial."

But Charles still hung back, and it required a great deal of persuasion to induce him to venture within a hundred

yards of the scene of his late discomfiture. By degrees, however, he edged himself nearer and nearer, and Agatha alternately coaxing and rallying, he succeeded at last in unfastening the halter, and leading Dobbin fairly out of the shed.

The children could scarcely believe that the wonderful feat was actually accomplished.

"It was I who did it," cried Charles exultingly; "you did not so much as touch him, did you, Agatha?"

"You forget," said his sister, highly displeased at her share in the business being overlooked; "if I had not made you come back, you would have run home like a coward."

"I am no coward," exclaimed Charles, drawing himself up; "if you thought so, why did you not undo the halter yourself?"

"It was not my place," retorted Agatha; "girls have no business to meddle with horses."

"That was not the reason," said Charles, laughing in derision; "the fact is, you were frightened and dare not."

"I deny it altogether," cried Agatha indignantly; "you were the first to run away, you know you were."

"No I was not," said Charles, who was beginning to grow very angry; "you screamed so loud, it quite terrified me, or I should never have thought of running away from a cart-horse."

"Especially when he is tied up," returned Agatha, tossing her head.

"I tell you what, Agatha," said Charles; "I have a great mind to ride home by myself, and leave you until you come into a better temper."

"O do by all means," said Agatha; "I should like very much to see you ride home by yourself; you are not at all afraid you know."

Charles's face was now red with passion; and fully resolved to put his threat into execution, he led Dobbin to a gate, the better to mount him. This he knew would be a very

formidable matter; the more so, as Agatha stood by laughing at his ineffectual attempts.

With violent exertion he climbed to the top of the gate, and, arrived there, hoped by a dexterous spring to alight on the animal's back. But Dobbin, alarmed at the unaccountable manœuvres of his young master, retreated as far from him as the halter would permit; nor could all the words in the English language prevail upon him to come any nearer. Moreover Charles' situation was neither safe nor pleasant; for he was compelled to cling to the gate with both his hands to prevent a fall; and this very ridiculous position caused Agatha to laugh till the tears ran down her cheeks. Stung to the quick, he determined to make one desperate effort; and having, by a succession of pulls, succeeded in drawing the creature a little nearer, he gave a sudden jump, and immediately found himself all his length on the grass; and saw, to his unspeakable dismay, Dobbin cantering off in the distance.

At the sight of this mischance, Agatha ran to her brother; and, full of remorse for her petulant conduct, assisted him to rise, and overwhelmed him with her caresses.

"Dear Charles!" she exclaimed; "how could I be so naughty and unkind to you?"

"It was quite as much my fault as yours," returned Charles, whose self-importance was considerably lessened by his fall; "but look at Dobbin, he is almost out of sight."

"Let us run after him," cried Agatha, beginning to hasten on.

"I think," said Charles, "you had better go back to the cottage, and I will do the best I can to catch him. I dare say when his fright is over he will stop to graze a little."

Agatha was very reluctant to give up her point; but fearing the anger of Dame Fletcher, she began to retrace her steps, looking back every moment to watch her brother's unsuccessful efforts to catch Dobbin.

CHAPTER VI.

ADVENTURES OF AGATHA AND CHARLES.

"WELL, so you're come at last!" exclaimed Dame Fletcher, as Agatha, hot and tired, entered the cottage. "You'd almost as good have stopt out all day!"

"Softly, mother; softly," said the gamekeeper, who was cleaning his gun in a corner. "I told the lass she might go; so there's no harm done."

"No harm done!" echoed his wife in her shrillest 'tone; "I wonder what you call harm, when I've had to do all the work myself, and hold the child into the bargain; let alone fetching water from the well! You might have known better than to send her sauntering through the fields at this time o' day."

"But where's Jack?" asked the gamekeeper, who never ventured to contradict his wife; "why does n't the lad bring up Dobbin?"

"Dobbin has run away," replied Agatha, as she very composedly took off her bonnet.

"Run away!" screamed the gamekeeper, laying down his gun; "what in the world do you mean, girl!"

"I mean what I say," returned Agatha, in rather a haughty manner; for the familiar way in which honest John Fletcher and his wife addressed her began to grate upon her ear.

"And pray where's Jack? has he run away?" asked the gamekeeper.

"He is running after Dobbin, and I hope he may catch him," said Agatha; and overpowered with heat and fatigue,

she sat down in the little porch, and began to fan herself with her pinafore.

Mrs. Fletcher was now thoroughly provoked.

"What's all that for?" cried she; "you don't suppose you're going to sit there all day, do you?"

"I am only resting a little," said Agatha, who felt a very strong inclination to resent Dame Fletcher's impertinent behaviour.

"And a precious deal you've done to tire yourself," cried the gamekeeper's wife. "Come, put on your bonnet, and carry this basket of eggs to the hall. They ought to have been there in time for breakfast; so make haste about it."

Agatha hesitated; for a more unwelcome task could not have been imposed upon her; but seeing Mrs. Fletcher was in no mood for trifling, she slowly tied on her bonnet, and took the basket of eggs in silence.

She had scarcely reached the garden-gate when the dame called her back.

"You'd best take the child along with you," said she; "a mouthful of fresh air will do him good."

Agatha eyed the infant with a glance of ineffable disdain.

"I cannot possibly carry that great baby," said she at length.

"Don't tell me," said the dame angrily; "you've carried him many a time before, and thought nothing about it."

"O but remember that children grow heavier every day," returned Agatha, who had an innate love of argument.

To this the gamekeeper's wife made no reply; but casting on Agatha a look of great indignation, laid the child in her arms, and without heeding her expostulations, pushed her out of the cottage.

"I've a great mind to throw it down," cried Agatha, as soon as she got out of sight of the window; but not daring to do that, she relieved her mind, by giving the child a hearty shake.

The sun had now reached the meridian, and the hall she well knew was distant about a mile and a half. She had often, in company with Charles and Miss Montague, visited the gamekeeper's lodge on cool summer evenings, to look at the poultry and peacocks, and to eat strawberries and cream, in the little porch.

On these occasions, James was accustomed to lead the pony by their side, for the convenience of any member of the little party, who might happen to be fatigued. Now, alas! there was neither James nor the pony, nor good kind Miss Montague, to tell fairy tales, or to set riddles as they went along.

Moreover, Dame Fletcher's baby chanced to be cutting its teeth; and feeling itself very awkwardly handled by its new nurse, it began to scream and cry most lustily. Poor Agatha did every thing in her power to pacify it, but in vain. It would neither be coaxed nor scolded into quietness, and kept on cry, cry, cry, till her patience was exhausted, and laying it down on the grass, she burst into tears.

At this moment, who should appear in the distance but Charles, walking very slowly, and holding his handkerchief to his head. As he came nearer, Agatha called to him to know what was the matter.

"I have knocked my head against a post," cried Charles, very pathetically; "and O Agatha, I shall never catch Dobbin. I am quite worn out with trying."

"Dear Charles," said Agatha, forgetting her own grief, and playfully caressing her brother, "let me kiss it and make it well; and don't run any more after that stupid cart-horse."

"O but the worst part of the story is, that I have seen the gamekeeper," replied Charles; "and he says if I don't catch Dobbin, he shall give me a good hiding. Did you ever hear such a vulgar expression? But cannot you quiet the baby?" he added, stopping his ears. "I declare it has made my head ache already."

"I would leave it here till I came back, if I dare," said Agatha; "for my arm quite trembles with carrying it. But," continued she, taking again the child and the basket, "I am going with these eggs to the hall. Can you imagine any thing more disagreeable?"

"No; not even the Saxons or the dates," said Charles, going; "or my unfortunate French exercise either."

Agatha at last reached the hall; and quite forgetting what was required in her humble station, walked up to the front door, and rang at the bell. It was immediately opened by the powdered footman, who stared at her in amazement.

"If you please, I have brought the eggs," stammered Agatha, very much confused.

"Then, just please walk round to the other door," said the footman, angrily; "and mind your place better next time. None but gentlefolks think of ringing here."

Agatha turned from the door with a heavy heart, and her tears fell fast as she passed by the two little pieces of ground that her mamma had given to herself and her brother, to cultivate in their leisure hours. The tulips were blooming as gaily as ever; and the seeds they had set a week since, were already beginning to grow.

"It's all gone now," said Agatha, sadly; "how foolish and wicked we were to be discontented, when we had so much to make us happy."

The servants were at dinner in the great hall, and Agatha was told to sit down and wait until Cook could attend to her.

"But you must keep the child quiet, Nancy," said Mrs. Rachael; "for we can't have that noise dinning in our ears."

"The girl looks fagged to death," said Susan, the housemaid, getting up and taking the baby from her.

"Bless me!" cried Mrs. Rachael; "one would think you had enough of children, without meddling with Dame Fletcher's brat!"

"Poor little innocent," said Susan, as she rocked the child

on her lap. "If Miss Agatha and Master Charles gave no more trouble than you do, we should get on well enough."

"They are the plague of every body's life," returned Mrs. Rachael, rubbing her nose impatiently, as though the subject was a very irritating one; "Master Charles is so humoursome, and as for Miss Agatha, she would argue and wrangle you out of your seven senses."

"They tease poor Miss Montague nearly to death," said the powdered footman. "I believe she often gives up for peace's sake; and because she can't stand it no longer."

During this conversation, Agatha sat conscience stricken, and scarcely dared raise her eyes from the ground. Though annoyed beyond measure at these remarks, she felt keenly how much her past conduct deserved them; and a sigh of contrition escaped her almost involuntarily.

The cook now relieved her of her basket of eggs; and having bestowed them in the dairy, paid her the amount, and told her she might go as soon as she pleased.

Agatha was only too happy to avail herself of the welcome permission; and Susan, who had hushed the baby to sleep, gave it again into her arms. Then, fetching a large slice of plum-cake, she told her to sit still and eat it.

"Thank you; I am not hungry," said Agatha, for her heart was too full to allow her to swallow.

"Well, if you're not hungry now, you may be before you get home," said the good-natured Susan: "or perhaps little Jack might like a taste."

The thought of her brother made Agatha change her mind; and knowing his boyish love of dainties, she accepted the offered slice, intending to share it with him on her return.

The walk home was accomplished without much difficulty, for the baby slept quietly all the way, and the basket was emptied of its load.

New troubles, however, awaited her on entering the

cottage. Dame Fletcher stood ironing at the dresser; and shirts and aprons of snowy whiteness hung round the fire to air.

"Now, Nancy, my girl," said the dame, "lay the child in the cradle, and make haste with your dinner. You've got a rare lot of ironing to do before night."

The family meal had been concluded some time before; but Mrs. Fletcher drew from the oven a yellow basin, containing some potatoes and a bit of very fat mutton. She set it down on the table before Agatha, and then resumed her work with the greatest alacrity.

Agatha looked at the provisions, so different from what she had been accustomed, and at first turned away in disgust. But, presently, hunger overcame her scruples, and she tried with a fork to pick out some more tempting morsels.

"What, you're nice hungry, are you," said the dame; "come, either eat your victuals with thankfulness or put them away altogether. I want you to fetch me the clothes in from the hedge."

When Agatha had finished her uncomfortable meal, she prepared to obey Dame Fletcher's orders, and went for this purpose into the kitchen garden at the back of the house. There she found Charles without his jacket, digging away as if for his life, at the potato bed.

As soon as he saw his sister he stopped, and leaning on his spade, began to pour out his complaints. "O Agatha," he cried, "I never knew till now what hard work really meant. I have had such a morning."

"But did you catch Dobbin?" inquired Agatha.

O no, I never should have done, if I had run after him all my life. The gamekeeper caught him at last."

"And did he forgive you?" asked Agatha, in some concern.

"Yes, after he had given me a sound flogging," said Charles.

"What an abominable shame!" exclaimed Agatha. "I will go to him, and tell him we won't submit to such conduct! I will go directly," continued she, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"O pray don't," said Charles, interposing between her and the cottage, "he might flog me over again, you know, and you cannot imagine anything more disagreeable."

"Poor boy," said Agatha compassionately, as she wiped away her tears with the corner of her pinafore.

"And then the dinner," continued Charles, in a whisper, and looking round as if afraid of being overheard. "You never saw such a dinner in your life. The mutton was all fat, and you know I never eat any fat, and Dame Fletcher boxed my ears when I asked for a little preserve to my rice pudding."

"But look here," said Agatha, as she drew the slice of plum cake from her pocket, "here is a treat for you."

The sight of this unexpected delicacy made Charles almost forget his sorrows, but he would not touch it until Agatha had consented to take her share.

The feast was scarcely ended, when Dame Fletcher appeared in the doorway. Charles began to dig with renewed energy, while Agatha ran to the hedge, and after inflicting sundry scratches on her hands and face, succeeded in carrying away the clothes.

But the ironing was the worst trouble of all. Little Nancy Fletcher, considering her age, was as her mother used to boast, "as tidy an ironer as any in the village." Alas for poor Agatha! who had never handled an iron in her life, and seemed to think it was an implement made only to burn and scorch whatever came in its way. The heat and fatigue were intolerable to her, and no less so, the vulgar conversation of Dame Fletcher; and her thoughts recurred every moment to the gentle and refined

manners of her dear mamma, and Miss Montague, and the comforts of her elegant home.

And now, Charles having completed his task, came wearily in, and flung himself into a chair. He had scarcely rested a moment when the gamekeeper entered. "Jack, my lad," said he, "what are you idling there for, and the cow waiting to be milked? Come, off with you."

Charles, who retained a lively sense of his recent castigation, jumped up in a moment, and not at all understanding what he was going to do, hastened into the paddock, where the cow was grazing. The milking-stool lay upon the grass, and Charles, all eagerness to obey the gamekeeper's orders, overcame his natural timidity, and set to work in good earnest.

At the end of an hour John Fletcher grew very impatient for his son's return, and thinking something must be the matter went out to look.

He found the pretty white cow standing quietly enough, chewing the cud, and Charles totally absorbed in his new employment; but the milking-pail as empty as when he had carried it into the field.

"Why, how's this, Jack?" said the gamekeeper; "what in the name of patience have you been about?"

O sir, pray sir, don't be angry with me," cried Charles, turning round and exhibiting a face of the greatest distress. "Indeed it's not my fault, but the cow has no milk."

"Is the lad daft?" said the gamekeeper, roughly pushing him off the stool; "that's not the way to milk a cow;" and upon this he sat down, and milked her himself, while Charles, scarlet with anger and vexation, stood by his side.

"There now, drive her into the shed, and take the milk in to your mother," said the gamekeeper, when he had finished. But the pretty white cow had begun to graze, and continued to do so, quite regardless of Charles, who, by



Charles and the Cow.

a number of gesticulations and pantomimes performed behind her, vainly endeavoured to make her go on.

"How unlucky I am," thought he, when his patience was about exhausted; "what shall I do? perhaps I should make a great noise." Accordingly raising his voice, he set up such a fearful howl, that the cow was startled, and tossing up her horns, set off at full speed to the further end of the meadow. Charles terrified in his turn, endeavoured to make a hasty retreat, and fell headlong over the pail of milk in full view of the gamekeeper, who stood watching this extraordinary scene. Entirely occupied by his fright, Charles scarcely heeded the overthrow of the milk, but kicking the pail out of his way, he flew to the gate, and began to scramble over, as though his life was in immediate danger.

The gamekeeper instantly seized him by the collar, and shook him violently. "I think you'll drive me into beating you a second time before you've done," said he, "spilling all the milk, too, that your mother wants for her churn! What did you make that noise for?"

"I wanted to drive the cow into the shed, and she would not go on," said Charles, breathless with his exertions.

"Get home with you do," said the gamekeeper, giving him another shake, "and go to bed at once, for I can't keep my hands off you much longer, and precious little use you are up."

Charles was only too glad to avail himself of the permission to retire, and sneaking up the cottage stairs as noiselessly as possible, he flung himself on the bed. "How could I be so foolish as to envy the gamekeeper's children," said he, as he tossed restlessly from side to side; "surely no life can be harder or more miserable than theirs." To sleep was quite impossible, for beside the pain of these reflections, the loud voices of the gamekeeper and his wife sounded continually on his ear, as they talked over the

unusual delinquencies of their children, in the little room below.

At last, Agatha stole in on tiptoe, and sitting down on the bed, whispered in a cheerful tone, "O Charles, we are to go cowslipping in the wood to-morrow, all day long; wont it be delightful!"

"It will, indeed," said Charles, jumping up with glee, and forgetting all the troubles of the day; "but are you quite sure?"

"Yes, certain, for Dame Fletcher says the cowslips will be over in a few days, and she cannot finish her wine without some more. We are to take the great basket John and Nancy used to carry, and have dinner in the wood. I shall not be able to sleep for thinking of it!"

"Nor more shall I," returned Charles, "for we can do as we like, and there will be nobody to interfere with us. We have never been cowslipping before—really it's almost worth while being the gamekeeper's children after all!"

CHAPTER VII.

SCENES IN THE WOOD.

"WE need not begin to get cowslips till we have found the fairy ring," said Charles, as the two children walked leisurely towards the wood.

"O dear no," replied Agatha, "it only struck six by Dame Fletcher's clock as we came through the garden-gate, so we have plenty of time, and can sail our acorn-cups down the brook as long as we please."

"What a number of rabbits there are in that field!" exclaimed Charles, "one, two, three, four, five, there are so many I cannot count them."

"They seem so tame too," said Agatha, "I am sure we could catch one if we tried."

"And so put Dame Fletcher in a better temper," said Charles. Then laying down their basket they scampered away highly delighted with the novelty of the sport.

And famous sport it was to hunt the rabbits in that nice green meadow; for the sly creatures would almost suffer themselves to be touched, but when the children cried out, exulting in their success, pop would go the rabbit into its hole, and leave them to wonder how it could possibly have escaped.

An hour passed very quickly in this diversion, and then the children began to feel tired.

"Now let us go to the wood," said Charles, "and rest there under the shade of the trees."

"But I don't see the basket!" exclaimed Agatha, looking to the gate, and turning very pale.

"O it must be there," said Charles, "for I saw you lay it down, just inside the meadow."

They ran to the gate with all expedition, but no vestige was to be found of Dame Fletcher's basket or of their own dinner, which had been carefully wrapped in paper, and placed within it. The children looked at each other a few moments in silent perplexity.

"What shall we do all day without anything to eat?" said Charles, at length.

"It is Dame Fletcher's basket that I am thinking about the most," returned Agatha, "somebody must have stolen it while we were running after the rabbits."

"I cannot think what will become of us!" said Charles, throwing himself despondingly on the grass.

"We must run to the wood, and get as many cowslips as we can," said Agatha, "and so pacify Dame Fletcher, and tell her how sorry we are to have lost her basket."

"I have tired myself so much already," said Charles, "I shall never get to the wood to-day."

"O yes, you must," said Agatha, "or else what will become of me, toiling all by myself? Besides, you forget the fairy ring and the brook."

The thought of these new pleasures roused Charles from his lethargy, and banished from his face the gloom that had overspread it.

"But are you sure you know the way?" asked he as they walked along.

"O yes; it is a very little distance from the meadow where John and Nancy used to gather their cowslips, and you cannot imagine how many beautiful flowers grow about it."

They now entered the wood, and the deep shade and the profound stillness, inspired them with a feeling of indescribable dread. Grassy paths lay before them in all directions, and as they wandered on, their road seemed more and more

involved, and Agatha looked very serious, and made a great many pauses, to consider whether or no they were in the right way to the fairy ring. As if awed by the perfect quiet, they began to speak in whispers, and started at every bird that stirred among the trees.

At length Agatha, who had gone on a little before, uttered an exclamation of joy.

"I have found it! I have found it!" cried she, and Charles coming up a moment after beheld the spot for which they had been seeking with such eagerness.

And well did it repay their toil. There was the fairy ring, so large, and so complete, that one could almost fancy the tiny elves lay hidden in the fragrant bells of the hyacinth, and only waited for the moonlight hour to begin again their revelry.

All around stood tall elms spreading their majestic arms, and giving a broad cool shadow from the heat; and in the velvet turf, blossomed myriads of flowers that filled the air with their perfume. Yonder too, was the pretty little brook winding among the trees, now dark, now light, and whose waters were so clear that you might have counted every pebble in its bed. Charles and Agatha laughed and danced, and clapped their hands, and shouted for joy, until the woods re-echoed with the sound, and the little birds flew away in terror.

"Let us sail our boats, the first thing," said Charles, "see here are plenty of acorn-cups."

"Mine shall be the queen, and yours the king, and all these little ones the princesses;" said Agatha, "we shall soon see which swims the best."

"How nice it is!" cried Charles, scarcely able to express his enjoyment.

"But see," said Agatha, "my poor queen has gone to the bottom, and one of the princesses is shipwrecked already."

"This is a very dangerous strait," said Charles, as he

guided his acorn-cup through a gully of straws; "my boat is a better sailor than yours, or it would not have escaped. But look, look!" and he gave a loud hurrah; "it is gliding majestically into port."

"Do not be too boastful," said Agatha, laughing, and she had scarcely pronounced the words, when Charles' king, hurrying at full speed, came in contact with a stone, and was upset in an instant.

Charles looked very much mortified. "I am tired of boats," said he, "it is such a stupid game, let us play at something else."

"We had better gather the cowslips next," said Agatha, "for we can have nothing to eat till we get home again."

"True, I forgot that," replied Charles, "though I don't suppose we shall be many minutes over the cowslips."

Then after a short consultation as to the way they should take, they chose the path most sheltered from the heat, and which they felt satisfied led directly to the meadow. They pursued it for a long time, until all further progress was stopped by their old friend the brook. Now the gamekeeper's children, like true rustics, had been accustomed to take off their shoes and stockings, and paddle across; to accomplish such a feat as this never once occurred to Charles and Agatha, and they began to retrace their steps, in the vain hope of finding a bridge. They turned down another path, and met with the same success, another, and yet another, they tried, but everywhere they were baffled by that impertinent brook, that seemed to make merry at their distress, and dimple itself all over with a thousand smiles.

Thoroughly spent with fatigue, they sat down on the grass, and considered what was to be done.

"If I were a great man, I would fell a tree and make a bridge myself," said Charles, "but I tell you what I might do, Agatha:" added he, starting up, "I might carry you across."

"O Charles, you could not do it," said Agatha, drawing back, and regarding him with admiration.

"O yes, I could, easily;" said Charles, "come let us try."

"Are you sure we shall not be drowned?" enquired Agatha, still hesitating.

"Drowned!" repeated Charles; "no one could possibly be drowned in that little brook."

Agatha cast many a timid glance at the water, but Charles growing very impatient, she at length suffered him to take her in his arms. He then cautiously put his foot into the brook, and in an instant drew it out again.

"I don't like to wet my shoes and stockings," said he, half crying, "and the water is so very cold."

"But we really must get over, some way or other;" returned Agatha, "I am sure I dare not go home without the cowslips."

"No more dare I, to tell you the truth;" said Charles, "so I suppose I must try again."

Then with various exclamations of fear and dislike, and sundry starts, that caused poor Agatha to tremble for her safety, Charles staggered into the stream. When he was exactly midway between either bank, a large water rat, roused from its afternoon's nap by the unusual noise and splashing, peeped out of its hole, and the better to indulge its curiosity, swam hastily across the brook.

"O Charles, the rat, the rat!" cried Agatha, quite forgetting the necessity of keeping up her brother's courage.

Charles looked round in terror, and seeing the creature close by his side, he uttered a loud scream, and letting Agatha fall, ran back with all speed, scrambled up the bank, and climbed the nearest tree, in far less time than it takes to relate the adventure.

Still fancying himself in danger, he clung tight to the branches, and trembled so violently, that the leaves among which he was hidden shook like the foliage of the aspen.

Poor Agatha thus abandoned to her fate, got up as well as she could, and wading to the bank before her, turned round intending to scold her brother for his cowardice.

"O you silly boy," said she, "why did you run back when you were half way across? You cannot think how you have hurt and bruised me by dropping me in that manner."

"I am very sorry," said Charles, putting his head timidly from among the boughs of the tree; "but what could I do? the rat was quite near enough to bite me."

"It was a great deal more likely to run away from you;" said Agatha, "but come down, there's a good boy, we have not gathered a single cowslip yet."

"I dare not, Agatha;" said Charles, shivering and shaking, "I never climbed a tree before, and I dare not stir for my life; O I wish we had never found the fairy ring!"

Agatha now began to feel faint with hunger. Anxiety too, made her poor little head ache sadly, and the thought of the disgrace, that must befall them on their return, gave her a pang at her heart.

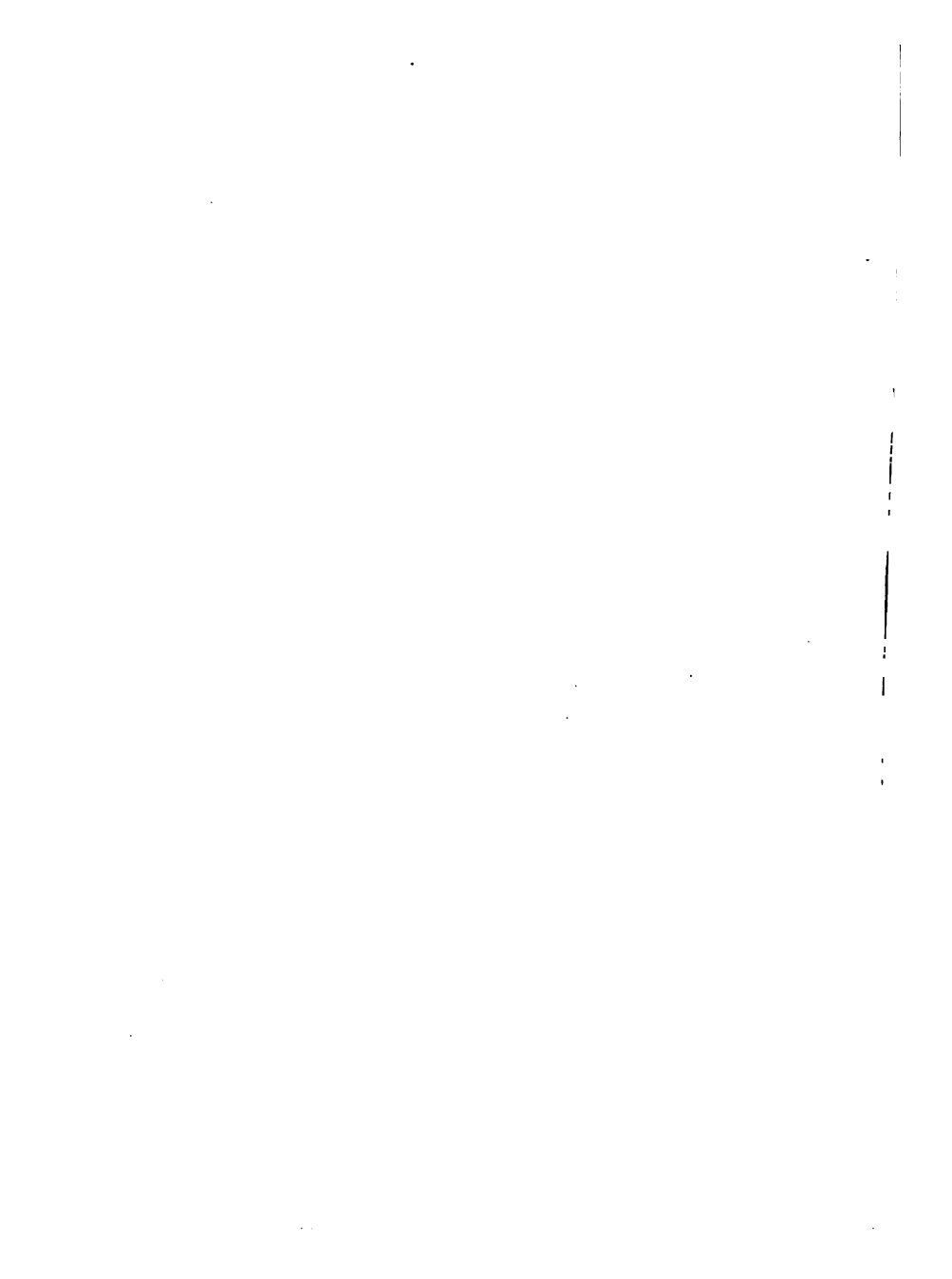
"I will run on to the cowslip meadow by myself," said Agatha, "and when I have gathered enough, go back to the gamekeeper's cottage, and ask him to come and help you."

"O pray don't leave me;" screamed Charles, in an agony of fear; "I dare not stay here by myself for all the world."

Just at this moment, a loud noise was heard, as of some one forcing his way through the bushes; Agatha terrified lest a new disaster should befall them, ran into the thicket, and couched down, heedless of thorns and briars; while Charles not daring to breathe, clung more tenaciously than ever to the tree. In this alarm we must for the present leave them, and give in the next chapter some account of the picnic, in which John and Nancy Fletcher played so conspicuous a part.



The Fright in the Wood.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE PICNIC.

"WHAT a smart concern to be sure!" said John, as with his hands in his pockets he walked admiringly round Mrs. Falkland's elegant carriage. His sister, quite prepared for the excursion, stood by his side; but Miss Adeliza Curzon had not yet completed her toilet, and the rest of the party were politely waiting within doors, until the young lady should appear.

John's eyes glistened, as one basket of provisions after another, was carefully stowed away by the footman, and a tempting array of dainties he had never tasted, passed in quick succession before his mind. One basket, in particular, that the cook had placed under the seat of the carriage, attracted his attention, from the very agreeable odour that proceeded from it; and he longed to raise the cloth, and peep at its contents.

The absence of the powdered footman at length enabled him to gratify his curiosity, and jumping into the carriage, he dragged out the basket, lifted up the cover, and saw, to his unspeakable joy, a most splendid plum-cake.

"O Nancy!" cried he, "do come and look! isn't it a famous cake?"

"It is, indeed;" exclaimed Nancy, clapping her hands with delight; "but don't you long for a taste?"

"And why should n't we?" replied John, in a decided tone; "the cake is ours, and the carriage too, and the powdered footman into the bargain, now we're become the Miss and Master."

"But, Mrs. Falkland?" said Nancy, timidly.

"O never mind about her, she's out of the way, thank goodness; so sit down there, and I'll cut you a capital slice."

So saying he placed the cake on his knees, and drawing out a large clasp knife, began to work away most zealously.

"This is cut and come again;" said he, as he offered a huge slice to his sister, who was in the act of conveying it to her mouth, when the footman suddenly opened the door, and Miss Adeliza Curzon, followed by Mrs. Falkland and Sir Harry Bartram, made their appearance. Miss Adeliza withdrew her foot from the step, and turned away, with an expression of extreme disgust.

"It's those children, again;" said she, curling her lip with disdain.

As soon as John caught sight of Mrs. Falkland's angry countenance, he rubbed his knife on the sleeve of his coat, and shutting it, abruptly thrust the cake under the seat; while Nancy crammed the huge slice into her pocket, to be devoured at a more convenient time.

"Charles! Agatha!" exclaimed Mrs. Falkland, looking from one to the other, in high displeasure; "what is the meaning of this?"

The children made no reply; but turning very red in the face, sat with their eyes fixed on the ground.

"My dear Madam," said Sir Harry, good-naturedly, "You forget the natural affinity between boys and plum-cake. I dare say in my younger days, I committed far more serious depredations than my little friend, here; and escaped with impunity."

But Mrs. Falkland regarded the culprits with unabated severity.

"I cannot think of indulgence;" said she, "when your conduct calls so loudly for correction. You must therefore return to the house, and be committed to the care of Mrs. Rachael, while we proceed on our excursion."

At the dreaded name of Mrs. Rachael, the children roused themselves from their lethargy, and cast so beseeching a look on Sir Harry, that the kind-hearted baronet was moved to still greater exertions in their behalf. He begged so hard, that their mamma was at length induced to retract her sentence, and received them once more into her favour.

During this delay, Miss Adeliza Curzon reclined gracefully on a garden-seat, and it was not until she had entertained Sir Harry with a long harangue on the naughtiness of children, and the firmness of her friend the marchioness, that she suffered him to lead her to the carriage.

The drive to the wood was short and easy, and lay through a pretty green lane shaded by trees. But John and Nancy thought it would never be ended, for they dared neither stir nor speak in the awful presence of Mrs. Falkland. There was but one consolation under all these troubles, and that was, to pass so many of their old playmates, and to be bowed and curtsied to, as the young lady and gentleman of the hall.

John was very much elated by this homage; and struck with his own importance, he pulled down his waistcoat, settled his collar, and hoped to dazzle the village boys by his magnificence.

The gratification of his vanity very soon came to an end; and on arriving at the wood, the children found it sadly dull work, to walk hand in hand after the rest of the party, narrowly watched by the scrutinizing glances of Mrs. Falkland.

"What's the good of coming here to look at green trees that one sees every day of one's life?" whispered John, as he listened with supreme contempt to the exclamations of the company.

"I wish they would let us play," returned Nancy; "it's so stupid to walk about in this way doing nothing."

"I'll tell you what," said John, in a low and emphatic voice; "we'll run away."

"Run away!" repeated Nancy; "O John, how can we, when she turns round every moment to see if we are coming?"

"Never mind that," said John; "let's wait till her back's turned, and then set off down one of these narrow paths, and run as fast as we can till we're quite out of sight."

"And then play," said Nancy, in a tone that showed how agreeable the proposal was to her.

The wished for opportunity soon presented itself, and the children scampered away, winding about among the bushes, to make the pursuit as difficult as they could. When they were fairly out of breath they stopped and listened; but not a sound was heard, save the song of the birds, and the gentle rustling of the wind among the leaves.

"We're safe now, however," said John, throwing himself on the ground, and rolling about to enjoy the sweets of liberty.

"But what's that lad doing in the tree?" cried he, his eyes suddenly resting on poor Charles.

"Hush, hush!" said Nancy; "I believe it is Master Charles Falkland."

"No such thing; it's Jack Fletcher, the gamekeeper's son, and I am the young squire, you know," said John, drawing himself up with offended dignity.

"I say, Jack, come down directly, and play with me at ducks and drakes in the brook."

"I don't know how to play at ducks and drakes," replied Charles, in a dismal voice; "and I only wish I could get down."

"Why, jump, to be sure," cried John; "it's not above a yard or two: and don't you see, that I am 'Squire Falkland's son; and you, Jack Fletcher, ought to do as I bid you."

At this moment, Agatha, whose terror had abated on hearing the sound of John's voice, crept from her hiding-place, and presented a truly pitiable spectacle. Her bonnet

was bent in every direction, her tippet torn to shreds, and her poor little face covered with scratches.

"O do help him down—please help him down," said she to John; "for we are nearly pinned to death in this wood."

"Help him down!" cried John; "what does he want helping for? What a coward he must be!"

"I am no coward, I am sure!" exclaimed Charles; "but I shall be killed if I try to get down."

"We shall soon see that," said John; and pulling off his shoes and stockings, he paddled across the brook, climbed the tree, and dislodging Charles from his hiding-place, laid him all his length on the grass, before he had time to utter a single shriek.

"I am very much obliged to you," said Charles, rubbing his limbs to ascertain if they were all safe and sound.

"Now you must play with me," said John; "but we had better go over the brook before we begin."

"The brook!" said Charles, drawing timidly back.

"Why, you're surely not afraid of the brook! are you?" asked John.

"Not exactly," replied Charles; "but do you know, there is such a terrible rat in a hole under that bank."

"A rat!" cried John, in ecstasy; "only let him come out, and see if I won't catch him."

Charles regarded his new companion with a mixture of fear and admiration.

"Then you don't think it will hurt us?" said he.

"I am much more likely to hurt it," replied John, filling his pockets with stones; "so come, off with your shoes and stockings."

"I don't like taking off my shoes and stockings, though," said Charles, still hesitating.

"You can keep them on if you like," returned John; "but I am a young gentleman, you know, and my shoes

are of bright leather, with smart buckles, so that I must n't spoil them."

Charles looked wistfully at the opposite bank, and was unwilling to make a second attempt.

"Come along, can't you?" said John, who was amusing himself by paddling backwards and forwards like an amphibious animal.

"I dare not; indeed, I dare not!" exclaimed Charles. "I believe I see the rat again, peeping out of his hole, as it did before."

"Well, then, ride on my back, and I'll carry you over in a twinkling," said John; "only make haste."

Charles felt very reluctant to take such a liberty, and remembering the fate of poor Agatha, he was still less anxious to try the experiment. However, the young squire, as he called himself, was not to be contradicted, and Charles being obliged to yield, was, in a few moments, safely landed on the other side.

"I declare, you've pinched me black and blue with holding on so tight," said John. "Why, what a timid lad you are!"

"Only think, John!" said Nancy, to whom Agatha had been relating all the troubles of the day—"only think, they've had nothing to eat since six o'clock this morning."

"How's that?" asked John, who could imagine no greater misfortune happening to any living creature.

"We were so foolish as to run after the rabbits, and some one stole our basket in the meantime," replied Agatha.

"Indeed!" said John. "If it had been me, I'd have eaten my dinner first, and hunted the rabbits afterwards; but you needn't much mind, we can give you a better dinner than that, and all sorts of nice things into the bargain."

"O can you?" said Charles, who felt his spirits revive at this welcome intelligence.

"But you had best walk a step or two behind me," re-

turned John, remembering his lesson of the ploughboy; "for I'm the young 'squire, you know; and it would not do for me to associate with the gamekeeper's son."

The powdered footman had just finished setting out the viands on the grass, and was regarding his work with great satisfaction, when a stone flung from behind a tree, alighted on the glass dish containing the custards, and smashed it to pieces.

At the same moment, John and Nancy made their appearance, followed by Charles and Agatha, who, hand in hand, walked at a respectful distance behind them.

"I say, James, is dinner ready?" cried John, in a commanding tone.

"Yes, Master Charles," replied the footman, astonished at the unusual mode of address; "but you might have known better than to break your Mamma's dish to pieces."

"Are the custards spoilt?" asked John, running eagerly to look at the mischief.

"They're all gone on the top of the pigeon pie," returned James, highly aggrieved.

"Well, clear them off, can't you? And now then," said John, turning to Charles and Agatha, who stood timidly by, "just sit down and help yourselves."

"O no, thank you!" cried both the children at once, "we should not think of such a thing. If you only give us a piece of bread, it will be quite enough."

"Well, that is odd!" said John, looking at Charles from head to foot, as if he were a curiosity in nature. But Charles and Agatha were firm in their refusal; and the good natured Susan having cut each of them a piece of bread and cheese, they sat down to eat it under a tree, as far from the young Squire as they could.

The footman had now restored some degree of order to the dinner, spread as it was on the ground; and John grew very impatient for the return of the company, that he

might feast on the good things displayed so temptingly before him.

"I say, Nancy, we'll begin," said he, at length, to his sister.

"O no, I dare not, for all the world," replied Nancy, drawing back.

"Nonsense; I'm not afraid," said John. "Surely there's nothing wrong in eating when one's hungry." So saying, and disregarding the vehement remonstrances of the powdered footman, he sat down and attacked everything in succession. Nancy was soon prevailed upon to take her share, and they finished by devouring an incredible number of most delicious little tarts.

"There, now I'm comfortable," said John, looking at Charles and Agatha, who had watched with fear and trembling the progress of this devastation; "and now I'll amuse myself a little by pelting the rat."

"And I'll go to," said Nancy, running after her brother, who already began to rattle the stones in his pockets.

In the meantime, Mrs. Falkland and her party having searched in vain for Nancy and John, were returning, very much fatigued, towards the spot where they intended to dine.

Miss Adeliza Curzon was complaining of the heat, and just expressing her inability to go many steps further, when a hard round pebble grazed her forehead, and went through the tip of her white lace bonnet. The young lady screamed with an energy that quite belied her fainting condition, and Sir Harry, pushing his way through the bushes to find the perpetrator of the deed, came in contact with John, who was about to throw another stone.

John struggled and kicked in the grasp of Sir Harry; but no sooner did Mrs. Falkland appear, than he gave up all for lost, and quietly resigned himself to his fate.

"Don't you see, you wicked, unprincipled boy," cried

Miss Adeliza Curzon, whose strength had been recruited by the blow; "don't you see what a frightful mark you have made on my forehead, that may never come off again?" and she burst into a paroxysm of grief at the thought.

"I was going to pelt at the rat," said John, trying to vindicate his politeness; "and I'm sure I didn't know it was you."

Mrs. Falkland was too much annoyed to speak, and taking her son by the arm, she led him on in silence. But when they came in sight of the preparations for the pic-nic, a scene of ruin met their eyes.

"Who has been doing this?" cried Mrs. Falkland, scarcely believing what she saw.

"It's Master Charles, ma'am, who declared he wouldn't wait no longer," said the powdered footman, half crying with vexation.

"And I dare say those little vagabonds have helped him," said Miss Adeliza, looking angrily at Charles and Agatha.

"No, indeed, ma'am," said Susan, jealous for her little favorites; "they're Dame Fletcher's children, ma'am, and as respectable as any in the village. They knew better than to take the best of everything, as Master Charles wanted them, and I've had hard work to make them eat a crust of bread and cheese."

"But there's no believing what those sort of people say," whispered Miss Adeliza aside to Mrs. Falkland. That lady, however, made no reply, and looked kindly at the children, who stood confused and trembling, longing to run into her arms.

"You are spending your May-day in the wood, I suppose?" said she, with a benevolent smile.

"O no," replied Charles; "we came to get cowslips, but lost our way, and have wandered about till we are tired."

"It is rather strange for you to be tired, John,"

returned Mrs. Falkland; "and I thought you knew every inch of ground, and blade of grass in the wood."

Charles was very much confused at this speech, and Agatha, who noticed with alarm, how low the sun was sinking in the horizon, proposed they should take their departure.

Reluctantly they turned their steps to the meadow full of cowslips that now lay within their sight, and great was their distress thus to leave their dear Mamma, without one single fond caress!

John and Nancy, on the other hand, looked wistfully to the meadow, and longed earnestly to fill their basket as they had been wont, and then carry it home, singing and dancing the while, to their mother's cottage, there to be kissed and praised, as the best and most industrious children in the parish.

When Charles and Agatha were gone, Mrs. Falkland made Nancy sit down on the grass, at a little distance from the party; but where she might have her eye constantly upon her. Then taking John by the hand, she led him to the carriage, and having shut him up within it, charged the footman to keep a strict watch that he did not escape.

As soon as Mrs. Falkland had retired, John occupied himself in searching every corner and cranny of the carriage, in the hopes of finding something either to eat or to play with. All he could discover was an elegant shawl, the property of Miss Adeliza Curzon, who had in an evil hour left it behind on account of the heat.

For a time he amused himself with twisting it into all sorts of shapes, and converting it, first into a cloak, and then into a turban, just as he pleased. Growing weary of this employment, he knelt down, and pressing his nose, mouth, and chin, against the glass of the window, tried to coax the powdered footman into a little friendly conversation. These attempts proving quite unsuccessful, he made faces

at him, and began to utter all kinds of strange uncouth noises. But he was compelled to desist, by James threatening to fetch his mistress; and he then could devise no better remedy for his ills, than by taking a nap.

Accordingly, he stretched himself all his length on the seat, and doubling up Miss Adeliza's shawl for a pillow, he fell fast asleep, in which happy condition we will for the present leave him.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONCLUSION.

"GATHERING cowslips is the hardest work of all," exclaimed Charles, sitting down to rest, and wiping the drops from his forehead. "My back aches so dreadfully, I am sure I cannot get any more."

"I should think we have enough," said Agatha, "for my pinafore is quite full, and you have those two great bunches."

"Then let us go home directly," returned Charles, "before it gets dark."

"Don't you remember," said Agatha, as she tied the bunches together, "that we once saw on Dame Fletcher's parlour floor, a white cloth covered all over with cowslip flowers? I am sure there were not nearly so many as we have here."

"O yes, I remember all about it," said Charles, hurrying on, "but if we only get safe home I don't mind."

It was quite dusk when the children reached the gamekeeper's cottage, and as they walked up the little garden, they could see Dame Fletcher, and her husband, sitting by the cheerful bit of fire, that blazed on the hearth. The dame was turning her wheel as usual, and the gamekeeper amusing himself, after his hard day's work, by dancing the baby up and down, while the little one laughed and crowed with delight.

"I declare that child is not gone to bed yet," whispered Agatha, "what a nuisance."

"But it's not crying, happily," replied Charles; "I don't much mind about babies when they are good."

"Good dear heart!" exclaimed Dame Fletcher, as the children opened the door; "who would have thought of your stopping out till this time o' night?"

"We lost our way," said Charles, very meekly, "and that made us so long."

"And pray where have you been then?" cried she, turning sharply round, "tell me this minute, or I'll flog you myself."

"To the fairy ring," stammered out Charles, who would fain have recalled his words.

"To the fairy ring! Why that's two good miles from the meadow any day. And what did you go there for?"

"To sail our acorn cups on the brook," said Charles, who felt himself getting every moment deeper into the scrape.

"But pray where's the basket?" asked Mrs. Fletcher. "Did you sail that on the brook too?"

"We lost it before we got to the brook," said Agatha, beginning to tremble for the consequences.

"Lost it! my bran new basket! that I bought to take to market of a Saturday," screamed Mrs. Fletcher, exasperated beyond endurance. "How did you do that?" said she, shaking Charles roughly by the arm.

"We laid it down at the gate," replied Charles, bursting into a loud cry, "and somebody stole it."

"And what in the world were you doing while?" said Mrs. Fletcher, giving him another violent shake.

"We—we—we were running after the rabbits," gasped Charles, looking at Agatha, who was sobbing as if her heart would break.

Affairs were in this threatening condition, when a loud knock at the door made Dame Fletcher start. "I wonder who that can be, at this time of night," said she to her husband.

The gamekeeper, calling Agatha to take the baby, opened the door, and in walked John and Nancy, followed by Mrs. Rachael and the powdered footman.

"Well, who would have thought it!" cried Dame Fletcher, lifting up her hands; "And so late, too; but any how I am right glad to see the dear little Miss and Master."

"You're not so glad as I am though," said John, flinging his arms round his mother's neck and giving her a hearty kiss.

"For shame, for shame, Master Charles!" cried Mrs. Rachael, pulling him away. "Have you no decent feeling, and your poor papa dying in his bed at this very moment!"

"Dying!" shrieked Agatha and Charles in the same breath.

"Why I cannot exactly say that either," returned Mrs. Rachael, alarmed at the effect her words had produced. "While there's life there's hope; but he was brought home from London about an hour since, so ill that the doctor don't much think he'll live the night through."

"Dear me," said Dame Fletcher, wiping her eyes, but what's amiss with him, Mrs. Rachael?"

"It's the fever, returned Mrs. Rachael, shaking her head very significantly; "Missis and the company had but just got home from pleasuring, when a messenger came to tell her to send the carriage directly, for master was at the station very ill indeed, and two gentlemen had brought him all the way from London, because he was determined not to die any where else, but at the hall. Missis was half frantic, and had him fetched home, and got to bed, and the doctor sent for, and every thing done in its proper course. And because the fever's so dangerous she sent Miss Lucy and the baby to Farmer Dobson's, and begs you wont mind taking in Miss Agatha and Master Charles for one night; to-morrow I'm going to take them to their grandmamma's; to be out of the way."

During this very long speech John and Nancy had been amusing themselves with peeping into all the little corners where their playthings were hidden.

Nancy was quite happy to find her doll, a fragment with neither arms nor legs, and whose hair had long ago been torn off its head, was in perfect safety; while John eagerly counted his ninepins and marbles, to see that all was right.

As for Charles and Agatha, they scarcely breathed, but drawing near to Mrs. Rachael, devoured every word as though life and death hung upon it. Dame Fletcher now began to push them about, in the vain hope of getting them to assist, in accommodating her guests.

"I declare, you're the woodenest girl that ever lived," said she to Agatha, who was helping her make up the best bed, "and hinder a deal more than you help one."

Poor Agatha tried very hard to 'do her best, and when all the preparations were complete, the little strips of carpet laid down, the clean quilt, smelling of lavender, carefully spread, the white curtains drawn close, and the best candlestick the cottage could boast, placed in readiness on the table, Mrs. Rachael, who was eager to get rid of her charge, marched them up to bed. John and Nancy were highly delighted at finding themselves once more under their own roof.

"I don't exactly wish Squire Falkland to die," thought John, "but I should not be sorry if he was to be ill a long time, if we might only stop here and do as we used."

"I wish we had never been changed," thought Nancy, "for that cross Mrs. Falkland is never pleased with any thing we do."

Dame Fletcher now came up-stairs to tuck them up, and see that all was comfortable.

"I may get up at six, and milk the cow, just for a treat, may'nt I?" said John, in an imploring tone.

"Why, what should a young master like you, know about milking cows?" asked Dame Fletcher, very much amused.

"O I know a great deal," said John, "and I should like to go about with the gamekeeper, and help him in the fields, too, if I might."

"And a good useful young gentleman you are, said Dame Fletcher, unable to refrain from giving him a motherly kiss; "there's nothing like being handy, even if you are Squire Falkland's son. But Mrs. Rachael will be here early in the morning, to take you to your grandmamma's."

"I hate going to my grandmamma's," cried John, flinging the clothes vehemently about, "I'd rather a great deal stop with you."

"O but your grandmamma's house is as grand as a palace," said Mrs. Fletcher, "and she has twenty servants at least, and two carriages, and such a beautiful garden."

"I don't care for that," said John; "they'll never let me play in it, I'll be bound; and there's no good in carriages and horses, when one's no comfort of one's life."

Charles and Agatha lay down that night, on their little beds, with very heavy hearts. Unable to sleep, they tossed to and fro, listening to the tick, tick, of the great Dutch clock; and freely indulging their tears. Agatha, haunted by the thought of her papa's danger, felt an agony of distress in her separation from him, that she could no longer endure.

"Charles," said she, groping her way to the side of her brother's bed; "are you asleep?"

"Asleep! how can I sleep?" cried Charles; "O papa, dear papa! how could we ever be so wicked as to wish ourselves away from you!"

"Charles," said Agatha, in a low voice; "papa is dying, and if we stay here till the morning, we may never see him any more."

"But what can we do?" said Charles, with a fresh burst of grief.

"I'll tell you what we can do;" replied Agatha, sitting down on her brother's bed, and throwing her arms round his neck; "we must run away from this hateful place, and go home again to mamma."

"Yes, so we will in the morning;" said Charles, "if we can but escape that dreadful Dame Fletcher."

"I shall not wait till the morning," replied Agatha, firmly, "if we don't go directly, it may be too late."

"What, in the dark?" exclaimed Charles, in a terrified voice; "O no, no, I dare not, Agatha!"

"I dare do anything to see papa;" said Agatha, as she began quickly to dress herself.

"Well, but Agatha, you cannot be serious;" cried Charles, resting on his elbow; "in the middle of the night, when dogs, and robbers, and all manner of dreadful things are about! we shall be in danger of our lives!"

"Nobody would hurt two poor helpless children;" said Agatha, as she tied on her bonnet; "and look how the moon shines! I can see the road as clearly as if it were daylight."

"But the gamekeeper would hear us go out;" said Charles; "and then what would become of us?"

"The gamekeeper has been asleep these two hours, and every one else in the house, but ourselves," replied Agatha.

"I cannot let you go alone;" said Charles, springing out of bed; "but, O Agatha, do wait till daylight, please, pray do."

"No, no;" cried Agatha, "I will not delay another moment; so make haste, and do not talk so loud, or we shall be found out."

Charles, seeing that his sister was quite firm in her resolution, began to dress in earnest, and when he had finished, the two children stole noiselessly down. But tread as lightly as they could, the old stairs creaked beneath their weight; even Agatha trembled, and more than once Charles

struggled hard to disengage his hand from hers, and run back into bed.

At length they reached the lower room. Still holding her breath, Agatha raised the latch, and a stream of cold night air came most unpleasantly through the open door.

"I am sure I dare not," said Charles, shrinking with fear; "O Agatha, it is so dark, and what is that great ugly thing by the gate?"

"You foolish boy, don't you know the old lavender bush? And it is fortunate the moon has gone behind a cloud, for then nobody can see us from the cottage windows."

"Do you think anybody is looking?" said Charles, shivering and shaking.

"No, I am sure everybody is fast asleep; so let me shut the door, and we can run home in less than half an hour."

Thus encouraged, Charles fairly set off, and as the children ran side by side down the lane, their little hearts beating with anxiety and terror. Not a sound was heard, save the hoarse baying of some watch-dog, disturbed by the noise of their footsteps, or the hooting of the owls, in the old church tower. The trees on either side, looked grim and spectre-like, and seemed to spread their shadowy arms, to grasp the little wanderers as they hurried by. The cattle in the fields, too, were strange and grotesque enough; and when a horse, that lay in the path, suddenly got up and galloped away, Charles screamed aloud; and it required all Agatha's persuasion to induce him to go on.

"I can see the hall in the distance, quite plainly," said she, "and the lights in the windows; and only look at the stars, how bright they are!"

"I dare not look at the stars, Agatha," replied Charles, "for fear of falling into the brook; I know it runs through this field."

"There is the brook," said Agatha; "like a mirror, with the moon shining full upon it."

"Pray, do not not stay to admire anything, now," said Charles; "I shall not think ourselves safe until we are in the lawn."

Exactly at this moment, though quite unperceived by the children, there hovered over their heads, a tiny chariot, formed of a golden lily, and drawn by white butterflies. In it, was seated, a beautiful little lady, dressed in a robe of bright azure; and with a single diamond in her hair, that sparkled like a star.

It was no other than the fairy Content, who dearly loves good children, and, without being seen by them, can make their lives as happy as a perpetual holiday. Many a time when Charles and Agatha had been busy in their little gardens, sowing their seeds, or watering their rose trees, and Miss Montague sat by, working or reading, Content made one of the party; and the children would laugh and talk, and wonder how it was they felt so light-hearted.

Often too, in the long winter evenings, when Nancy sat at work, beside her mother, and John was making nets for the fruit trees, or helping his father clean the guns, and the fire burnt brightly, and the kitten gambolled on the hearth; the good fairy would drop in among them.

The dame's wheel would then turn quicker than before, the gamekeeper begin to whistle, and John and Nancy to think themselves the happiest children in the world.

The kind fairy was sadly grieved when her little favourites became so naughty and discontented, and she resolved to cure this terrible evil before it grew into a habit. Her delicate wand had fallen on their eyelids when closed in sleep, and Charles and Agatha awoke the next morning in the gamekeeper's cottage, and John and Nancy were, as we have seen, changed into the young lady and gentleman at the hall.

Now, touched with pity at their distress, and convinced that the lesson would never be forgotten, she determined to remedy the mischief, and restore the children to their parents, and their homes.

Lightly as the falling dew, the magic wand again performed its work, and the two small figures running onward in the clear moonlight, were Charles and Agatha; while John and Nancy Fletcher, slept tranquilly beneath the thatched roof of their father's cottage.

Thanks to the courage and fortitude of Agatha, she and her brother did indeed reach once more the lawn. But as they were hastening up the broad gravel walk, Pompey, an enormous mastiff, sprang towards them with an ominous growl.

"He'll think we are the gamekeeper's children and bite us," said Charles, running back through the gate, and holding it quite tight. The dog meanwhile wagged his tail, played a thousand antics round his young mistress, and licked her hand to testify his joy at her return. Thus reassured Charles came forward, and ventured to caress the animal, who flew barking towards the house, as though to announce their arrival.

A post-chaise stood at the front door, and in the hall a group of persons were assembled, consisting of Sir Harry Bartram, Mrs. Rachael, Susan, the powdered footman, and several of the domestics. Miss Adeliza Curzon was busy hurrying all her boxes and packages into the hired chaise, with an activity quite astonishing in a young lady of her delicate health, talking and gesticulating all the time.

"O pray keep away from me, Sir Harry," cried she, "You rode home with Mr. Falkland, and are as certain to have the fever as you are born.—Please, Mrs. Rachael, don't come so near me, I can lift that bandbox very well myself—O Sir Harry, where's the driver? There, never mind about shaking hands, I want to start directly, before there is time

for the infection to spread." So saying, she poured a fresh deluge of eau de Cologne on her handkerchief, and holding it to her nose, stepped into the carriage, and gave orders to drive away at full speed.

"What a shame!" murmured the good natured Susan, "and poor Missis in such trouble."

"And me having to fetch a chaise from the town, too," returned the powdered footman, "because she dar'nt ride after master nor yet wait till the morning."

"She'll get her desert some day," cried Mrs. Rachael sharply; "but who in the name of wonder, are those two little figures coming up the walk?—Sure to goodness if it is'n't Miss Agatha and Master Charles! Why, you naughty disobedient children, what business have you here?"

"O don't be angry," cried Charles and Agatha, throwing themselves on their knees before Mrs. Rachael, and hiding their faces in her apron. "We thought if we did not run home to-night, we should never see dear papa any more."

"You don't mean to say," returned Mrs. Rachael, in a softer tone, "that you are come all by yourselves in the dark?"

"We have indeed," said Agatha; "and if you send us back we shall both die of grief."

They then burst into a violent fit of crying that prevented the utterance of another word.

Mrs. Rachael raised them gently in her arms, and rubbed her eyes as though a grain of dust had suddenly got into them. "It was very wrong, no doubt, but perfectly natural," said she, leading them into the house. "However, now you are at home, you must try to behave properly, and not tease your poor mamma, who has enough to worry her already."

During this short conversation, Sir Harry had been standing by, with a face expressive of the highest possible satisfaction. He now stepped forward, and taking Charles and Agatha

by the hand—"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Rachael," said he, "but I must insist on carrying my little friends at once to their mamma, and rejoicing her heart by this proof of their affection."

O thank you, thank you, dear good kind Sir Harry," cried the children, kissing his hands. "We shall love you all our lives."

"But before we proceed any further," said Sir Harry, "Though I like a joke as well as any body, I must beg that the farce with which you have entertained us for the last few days, may now be ended. I assure you, we much prefer the society of well-behaved people, whether they be old or young."

Charles and Agatha had been so absorbed in the thought of their papa's illness, and the many dangers to be encountered on their journey home, that the touch of the fairy's wand was quite forgotten. Now, however, Sir Harry's words recalled it to their minds, and in the greatest terror and confusion, they raised their eyes to give each other an expressive look. What was the delight of Charles, on beholding Agatha, his own sister Agatha, restored to him as lovely as ever; though her pretty black hair was disordered by the wind, and her eyes swollen with weeping.

Agatha saw too her own brother Charles, and in an ecstasy of joy the children threw their arms round the neck of the kind Sir Harry, and promised to do or say every thing exactly as he wished.

"There—that will do—you will strangle me, you rogues, if you don't mind," said Sir Harry, disengaging himself. "I am truly glad to see the young lady and gentleman have returned to the hall, and left the vulgar little rustics behind them at the gamekeeper's cottage."

As they ascended the staircase, the children's eager eyes caught a glimpse of their mamma, coming out of her room, looking very pale, and the tears upon her cheek. They

flew to her, and before she had time even to express her surprise, overwhelmed her with their caresses.

"Dear darling mamma!" cried they both at once. "Do not be angry, but we cannot bear to be away from you, when you are in such trouble."

"And we have run home, all in the dark," continued Charles, "because papa is so ill."

"And we are not at all afraid of the fever," said Agatha; if we may but sit outside his door, and hear him breathe, we shall be quite happy."

Mrs. Falkland pressed them tenderly in her arms. "Such a proof of your affection," said she, "must atone for every fault; and I can scarcely regret this terrible affliction, since it is the means of restoring to me my beloved children."

"You did wrong to accuse them of any want of feeling," said Sir Harry, as the children alternately laughed and cried, with delight at receiving, once more, their mamma's fond kisses; "and now having set their little hearts at rest, I must consign them to the care of Mrs. Rachael, for I perceive," added he, with a smile, "that to send them back to Dame Fletcher's is quite out of the question."

The next morning Charles and Agatha took their places in the school-room at a very early hour, and the geography had been learned, and the French exercise written, before Miss Montague made her appearance. That good lady was not sparing of her praises and encouragements; and so quickly did the time pass, that when the great clock on the stairs struck twelve, Charles ran out to see if it was right.

To their unspeakable joy, the doctor very soon pronounced their papa out of danger; and during his long convalescence, the children vied with each other who should be the kindest and most attentive nurse.

The moment school was over, Agatha would bring her work and sit by his side, while Charles searched the library

through, for some pretty story or amusing narrative to read aloud, and so beguile the tedious hours. And every morning they stripped the flowers from their little gardens, and then rambled to the lanes and meadows, to bring home roses and woodbines, that his chamber might be freshened with the sweet perfume of spring.

These attentions, and many more too trifling for us to relate, were highly grateful to Mrs. Falkland, who found her own fatigues considerably lessened by the tenderness and affection of her children.

Little Lucy, too, was quite astonished to find herself the pet and plaything of her sister; and her pretty prattling speeches never any more met with contradiction or reproof.

And when at last, papa was quite well, and again joined them in their play, no happier or more smiling faces were ever seen, either in the school-room or the wood, than those of Charles and Agatha Falkland.

As for John and Nancy, they were only too happy to find themselves once more among their equals and in their proper station. John never milked the cow or dug the potato-bed with more zeal and energy than on the morning after his second transformation; and Nancy found the humble duties of her mother's cottage both easy and delightful.

The wicked fairy, Discontent, never ventured any more to drop her poison in their ear; and should she ever visit our young readers, and make them feel dissatisfied with their present condition, whether rich or poor, we beg them to remember the story of John and Nancy, and the little children at the hall.

THE END.



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